

# **The Hidden Oak**

The Life and Works of George Mudie,  
Pioneer Co-operator

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## Introduction

*But why disturb his ashes? He has probably  
been dead for half a century, and not a soul  
remembers his name.*<sup>1</sup>

This is a biography of George Mudie (1787–1855), one of the founding fathers of the British co-operative movement. He was a newspaper proprietor, editor, journalist, printer, public speaker and pamphleteer who spent much of his career publicising the ideas of Robert Owen and tailoring them to a working-class audience. He was the driving force behind the first co-operative society, founded in 1821, and, later that year, the first Owenite co-operative community. In his writings and lectures he emphasised the economic benefits of co-operation and, in doing so, provided one of the first critiques of early nineteenth-century capitalism, helping to lay the foundations of socialist economic thought. He was also a passionate believer in education, both for children and adults, teaching English grammar, writing textbooks and devoting at least one of his journals to bringing a wide variety of literature and cultural ideas to a mass audience.

I discovered him while researching my family history. I had traced my mother's ancestors back to a Charles Mudie, born around 1824 in the City of London, whose father was George, a printer. I found George in a couple of censuses, but would not have given much more thought to his life had I not seen his death certificate, which said that he had been the editor of *The Sun* newspaper. An internet search for "George Mudie, *The Sun*" revealed – amongst numerous references to the Labour politician of the same name (not to mention the tabloid newspaper) – an article called *George Mudie (Owenite)*.<sup>2</sup> Mudie had been a supporter of the co-operative principles of Robert Owen;<sup>3</sup> he and a group of journeymen printers had formed the *Co-operative and Economical Society*, which set up a community at Spa Fields, Clerkenwell; and he had published a journal called *The Economist* (no relation to the one that exists today). At the end of the short article was a list of publications bearing Mudie's name, some of which had exotic titles, such as *The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars*; *A Solution of the Portentous Enigma of Modern Civilization*; and *The Grammar of the English Language truly made Easy and Amusing by the*

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<sup>1</sup> E.T. Jaques, *Charles Dickens in Chancery* (1914), commenting on George Mudie.

<sup>2</sup> The title has recently been changed to George Mudie (social reformer); see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Mudie\\_\(social\\_reformer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Mudie_(social_reformer)).

<sup>3</sup> For an account of Owen's co-operative principles see below, Chapter 4.

*Invention of Three Hundred Moveable Parts of Speech*, but without any description of their contents. Being interested in, but only superficially acquainted with, the history of the labour movement, I saw an opportunity to deepen my understanding of the early co-operative movement, using my great-great-great-grandfather as a way in. When, however, I read some of his articles in *The Economist*, particularly his thundering attacks on the *laissez-faire* capitalist economic policies of the industrial revolution, which had caused mass unemployment, destitution and starvation, I realised that George Mudie was a writer of real power and I wanted to study him more thoroughly.

The co-operative movement is best known for its retail stores, which played an important role in the lives of working-class people throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In its early years, however, it promulgated a vision of a network of communities organised on the basis of collective self-help. The movement's belief that the framework of society should be structured to benefit the people as a whole, rather than for individual aggrandisement, led to its members being called socialists, the first use of that word in British politics. Most of the leading pre-Marxian anti-capitalist economic writers were also co-operators, and co-operation was one of the pillars upon which the Labour Party was built.

George Mudie was one of the earliest co-operators, actively publicising Owen's ideas from about 1818 onwards. But even though he never abandoned his co-operative beliefs, he seems to have become isolated from the movement's mainstream during the 1830s, after which time his voice was only intermittently heard. He is often mentioned in histories of the co-operative movement, utopian communities and the development of early socialist ideas, usually as a minor precursor to better-known figures such as William Thompson, Dr William King and the "Rochdale Pioneers". With few exceptions,<sup>4</sup> historians seem to have been content to recycle the same basic information about him: his conversion of the London printers to Owenism, *The Economist*, Spa Fields, his involvement with the Owenite community at Orbiston and his sometimes acerbic letters to Owen. In my opinion, however, he is worthy of much closer attention.

Information about Mudie's life is fragmentary and there are several gaps in the narrative. However, while researching this book I found two primary sources, hitherto uncommented upon, which throw light on his political leanings at the beginning and end of his career: an early

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<sup>4</sup> The most notable exception is Professor Gregory Claeys, who is the only writer to thoroughly analyse all of Mudie's economic writings, and who has made the strongest case for Mudie as a serious contributor to socialist economic thought. See also M. Beer, *A History of British Socialism* (George Allen and Unwin 1919) and W. H. G. Armytage, *George Mudie: Journalist and Utopian, in Notes and Queries* (1957).



pamphlet which includes a defence of the radical MP Sir Francis Burdett, and newspaper accounts of his involvement in an attempt to unite the Owenite and Chartist movements in the years after the French Revolution of 1848. I also discovered that, before he became editor of *The Sun*, Mudie had worked as a journalist in Edinburgh and edited a series of newspapers in Nottingham and Leeds. After he left *The Sun* he published a rival London paper and, following his departure from Orbiston, he attempted to set up another one in Manchester. These were all mainstream newspapers, containing no radical or Owenite politics, and, although they do contain some good pieces of journalistic writing, do not directly impinge upon Mudie's economic ideas. However, the falling out between Mudie and one of his business partners, during which both parties castigated each other in print, makes for fascinating, if bizarre, reading and provides some clues to Mudie's character and motivations.

In addition to his newspaper activities, Mudie shared Owen's belief in education and defended the latter when someone else claimed to have invented the concept of infant schools. He advocated more progressive teaching methods than Owen had used and incorporated these into his school at Spa Fields. In later years he gave grammar lessons and wrote school textbooks which incorporated visual aids. He also believed in encouraging mass literacy through providing cheap literature to a working-class readership and maintained an association with some of the key figures in the underground radical press and cheap literature movements.

One of the odder manifestations of this association is shown in an account by an American solicitor, E. T. Jaques, of a lawsuit brought by Charles Dickens against the publishers of a pirate copy of *A Christmas Carol*, during which Mudie gave a witness statement for the defence. Jaques is damning of Mudie, accusing him of perjury and mocking the poor area of London that Mudie lived in as "a squalid retreat for a man of letters". Having cursorily searched for information about Mudie in the British Library, Jaques speculates, incorrectly, about who he might have been, but then says that, as nobody will remember him anyway, his ashes are not worth disturbing.<sup>5</sup> I have Jaques to thank for motivating me to convert my research into a biography of George Mudie.

In this book I explore Mudie's co-operative and educational activities, his economic writings and his journalism to present a fuller picture of his life than has previously been given.

Chapters 1 and 2 describe Mudie's early years in Edinburgh, from his birth until he was twenty-five, including the details of his childhood and education provided by Mudie himself. I summarise his father's troubled relationship with the Edinburgh Book Society and suggest what impact

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<sup>5</sup> E.T. Jaques, op. cit., p. 50.

this may have had on Mudie's character and actions later in life. I examine Mudie's pamphlet *A few particulars respecting the secret history of the late Forum* and explain the context in which it was written: the aftermath of the "Tron Riot" of 1811. I also give an account of Mudie's earliest surviving piece of writing, which I do not think has been previously considered.<sup>6</sup>

Chapters 3 and 4 cover the years 1813 to 1820, during which Mudie was a newspaper editor and proprietor in Nottingham and Leeds, including examples of his journalistic writing and an account of the acrimonious break-up of his business partnership, as chronicled in the local press. By way of introduction to Mudie's long association with Robert Owen, I describe the formulation of Owen's plan for villages of co-operation, the opposition that he encountered from both radicals and orthodox political economists, and the sources available to him to challenge that opposition on economic grounds. I note the striking similarity of style between Mudie's *The Economist* and two anonymous early Owenite economic tracts for which Mudie's authorship has been mooted by others.<sup>7</sup>

In Chapters 5 and 6 I examine Mudie's activities in London from 1820 to 1823, which is the part of his life which has received the most attention. I provide an account, based on contemporary sources,<sup>8</sup> of the foundation of the Co-operative and Economical Society and its community in Spa Fields. I also comment on Mudie's forceful writing style and explore his economic ideas in the context of other anti-capitalist writers such as Thomas Hodgskin, William Thompson and John Gray.

Chapter 7 focuses on his years in Scotland between 1825 and 1832. Using Mudie's letters, *The Orbiston Register* and the pamphlets of Abram Combe, leader of the Orbiston community, I describe the history of Orbiston, including Mudie's brief involvement, and suggest reasons why he and Combe were unable to work together. I chronicle Mudie's post-Orbiston activities: his involvement with *The Manchester Advertiser*, the development of his economic views in *The Advocate of the Working Classes*, his creation of another co-operative society, his serious illness and his dire financial straits. This forced him to make a living by means

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<sup>6</sup> *An Authentic Account Of The Trial And Execution Of John Bellingham, For The Assassination Of The Right Hon. Spencer Perceval; With A Vindication Of Sir Francis Burdett From The Aspersions Of Some Of The London Prints* (1812).

<sup>7</sup> *Mr Owen's Proposed Arrangements for the Distressed Working Classes, Shown to be Consistent with Sound Principles of Political Economy: in Three Letters addressed to David Ricardo, Esq. MP, and A Vindication of Mr Owen's Plan for the Relief of the Distressed Working Classes in reply to the Misconceptions of a Writer in No 64 of The Edinburgh Review.*

<sup>8</sup> *Report of the Committee appointed at a meeting of Journeymen, chiefly Printers, to take into consideration certain propositions, submitted to them by Mr. George Mudie, Mudie's own letters to Owen and his journals: The Economist and The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist.*

other than political or economic writing, as described in his letter to Owen of 1830 and evidenced by his *Daily Police Reports* and his cheap literature publication, *The Edinburgh Cornucopia*. The chapter ends with Mudie's taking sanctuary to avoid the debtors' prison and then fleeing to London.

Chapter 8 charts the development of the co-operative movement during Mudie's absence from London. I describe Mudie's return to London in 1832; his rejection by Owen; the rise of the exchange bazaar movement; his association with William King's Gothic Hall exchange bazaar; Owen's disapproval of bazaars organised on principles other than his own; Mudie's public criticisms of Owen and the eventual collapse of the movement. From isolated newspaper references I outline Mudie's continued co-operative activities during the early 1830s.

In Chapter 9 I summarise the activities of the unstamped press and Mudie's connection with it during the mid-1830s. I describe in detail the part played in the campaign against the New Poor Law by the anti-Malthusian tract, *The Book of Murder*, in which Mudie is extensively quoted; and I argue that Mudie wrote the whole preface to that publication.

Chapter 10 considers Mudie's educational activities from the late-1830s to the mid-1840s, including his grammar textbook and other planned publications, and his defence of his record in publishing cheap literature, as expressed in two letters to the press, speculating on his state of mind at the time. I also show how Mudie's association with leading publishers of cheap literature led to his involvement in a Charles Dickens lawsuit.

Chapter 11 looks at the rekindling of Mudie's political fires by the French Revolution of 1848; how he unsuccessfully tried to reunite with Owen and how he used the events in France to frame his own ideas about co-operation and economic planning in his final extant pamphlet.<sup>9</sup>

Chapter 12 contains an account, based on contemporary newspaper reports, of Mudie's hitherto untold involvement with the National Regeneration Society in 1849 and 1850, whose programme included elements of Owenite, Chartist and Christian socialist thinking. By way of introduction, I give a summary of the Chartist and Owenite activities during the years before 1848.

Wherever possible, I have used primary sources: Mudie's letters, pamphlets and periodicals, contemporary newspaper articles and genealogical records. I have quoted his own words extensively, as I have found him to be erudite, lucid, incisive and eminently quotable. In fact, the quality of his writing is one of the main themes of the book. In order to locate the available fragments of Mudie's life within the world in which he lived, I have also drawn on a range of secondary sources relating to the main movements, events and ideas which provided the backdrop to his

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<sup>9</sup> *A Solution of the Portentous Enigma of Modern Civilization* (1849).

life. These included: twenty-five years of war with France; the massive expansion of manufacturing industry in the wake of the industrial revolution; the dominant ideology of laissez-faire capitalism; grinding poverty, mass unemployment and starvation; numerous riots and attempted uprisings; large-scale repression; the ideas of Robert Owen and the rise of the co-operative movement; an upsurge of trade unionism; improvements in standards of literacy; the rise of a working-class press and government attempts to suppress it; the 1832 Reform Act; the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act and the expansion of the workhouse system; Chartism; and the European revolutions of 1848. These are all aspects of nineteenth-century history which have been thoroughly explored elsewhere. But, in drawing on the wealth of existing academic research, I have realised that Mudie was involved, in different ways and at different points in his life, in some of the most important attempts to improve and enrich the condition of those at the bottom end of society: an objective that was in its infancy during his lifetime, and remains just as challenging today. In telling the story of one feisty individual who, in addition to contributing his own ideas, rubbed shoulders, or crossed swords, with some of the key figures in early nineteenth-century working-class history, I hope that existing narratives will themselves become further illuminated.

## Cradled amid warehouses filled with books

*If something is not done before 6 o'Clock  
our Society is ruined, and Mudie triumphs.*<sup>10</sup>

George Mudie was born in Edinburgh on 24 June 1787 and baptised in Grey Friars Parish Church on 5 July.<sup>11</sup> He was the fifth of nine children born to George Mudie (or Moodie), a bookbinder, stationer, publisher and bookseller, and his wife Jean, daughter of Patrick Boyd, another Edinburgh bookseller.

Edinburgh in the late eighteenth century was a vibrant city, important as a centre for banking and insurance and possessing an intellectual vitality that was fuelled by the presence of some of the greatest names of the Scottish Enlightenment: philosopher David Hume, economist Adam Smith, historian William Robertson and sociologist Adam Ferguson. Their humanist and empiricist ideas were discussed and argued over at the university and in numerous debating societies.<sup>12</sup> These ranged from the elite, exclusive Select Society and the Poker Club to those like the Forum, which admitted anyone on payment of a subscription, and which Mudie junior joined as a young man.

The city may have been prosperous and intellectual, but its living conditions were squalid. Until the 1760s its inhabitants, rich and poor alike, lived in the Old Town, which consisted of high-rise (ten storeys were not uncommon) houses of multiple occupancy. The wealthiest tended to live on the first and second floors, with shopkeepers and tradesmen on the ground floor and poorer people higher up and in the basements. Overcrowding was a major problem:

the houses stand more crowded than in any other town in Europe, and are built to a height that is almost incredible. Hence necessarily follows a great want of free air, light, cleanliness and every other comfortable accommodation. Hence also many families, sometimes no less than ten or a dozen, are obliged to live overhead of each other in the same building; where, to all the

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from W. Creech to J. Bradfute, 20 April 1797.

<sup>11</sup> Edinburgh parish records – baptisms.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800*. (Oxford Studies in Social History). Rev. Charles Rogers, *Social Life in Scotland from Early to recent Times* (1884).

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other inconveniences, is added that of a common stair, which is no other in effect than an upright street, constantly dark and dirty.<sup>13</sup>

Chimney smoke could always be seen hanging over the city as thousands of families lit fires to warm their rooms, giving rise to Edinburgh's nickname, "Auld Reekie". "Reekie" meant smoky, not smelly, but smell it certainly did:

By ten o'clock each night the filth collected in each household was poured from the high windows, and fell in a malodorous plash upon the pavement, and not seldom on unwary passers by.<sup>14</sup>

The stench, known as "the flowers of Edinburgh", lasted until the streets were cleaned the following morning, apart from on Sundays, when, for reasons of piety, they were not cleaned at all.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1760s the town council started to build a spacious New Town to house the wealthier classes. Its classical architecture, wealth and intellectual standing allowed the city fathers to claim that Edinburgh was the "Athens of the North", and over the next sixty years most of those who could afford to do so moved out of the Old Town, leaving it as a ghetto for the poor.<sup>16</sup> The Mudies did not join the exodus. George's father owned a succession of bookshops, all of which were situated in the Old Town,<sup>17</sup> and although Mudie senior became wealthy enough to buy his own house, it was in a nearby location.

George's father was active in the Edinburgh book trade from the mid-1770s until about 1800 and books played a huge part in young George's childhood:

One of the many sons of a man who was the most enterprising and most extensive publisher and bookseller in Scotland, of his day; I was cradled amid warehouses filled with books – aroused at the dawn of every day of my infancy, childhood, and early youth, by the bustle of that publishing activity which pervaded every department of my father's establishments, – and lulled to rest on each returning night by the hum of literary discussions and literary

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<sup>13</sup> Town Council Minutes, 1st July 1752, quoted in A. J. Youngson, *The Making of Classical Edinburgh, 1750-1840*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1966 and 1988).

<sup>14</sup> H. G. Graham, *The social life of Scotland in the eighteenth century* (1906), p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Stana Nenadic, *The Rise of Edinburgh*, ([www.bbc.co.uk/history](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history), 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Head of the Horse Wynd 1778-80; Old Assembly Close 1784; Near the University 1788; Head of the Horse Wynd 1786-90; South Bridge Street 1790-92; 52 South Bridge East Side 1793-1801. *Scottish Book Trade Index*, National Library of Scotland.

projects, in which the principal scientific and literary men of Scotland were more or less interested.<sup>18</sup>

Mudie senior was a member of the Edinburgh Booksellers' Society and in 1786 became a Burgess of Edinburgh, a status which entailed both civic responsibilities and trading privileges.<sup>19</sup> The history of the Scottish book trade is well documented and the records of the Edinburgh Booksellers' Society contain several references to Mudie senior, who was in conflict with the Society's policies on more than one occasion.<sup>20</sup>

The book trade at that time was controlled by a small group of London booksellers, who had enough commercial muscle to punish provincial booksellers who did not abide by their established customs and practices. One such practice was that of perpetual copyright. The Statute of Anne, 1710, had limited copyright to fourteen years, renewable for a further fourteen if the author was still alive. The trade, however, practised a "sharebook" system, whereby copyright shares were traded by authors and publishers as private property, which existed in perpetuity. Any attempt to publish an unauthorised (and cheaper) edition was met by threats of legal action. In a landmark ruling in 1774 the House of Lords stated that copyright was subject to the time limits set by the Statute. The trade's response was to carry on as if nothing had happened. Most provincial booksellers agreed not to challenge perpetual copyright, and in return they were both able to purchase London-published books at wholesale prices and to protect the copyright of anything they had published themselves. The only losers were the customers, who had to pay artificially high prices for books.

Mudie senior was one of those who challenged the consensus. In 1791 he led a syndicate of a dozen booksellers who published an edition of William Robertson's *History of Scotland*, a popular, major work, whose copyright had expired. In spite of having the law on their side, the syndicate were nervous about possible adverse reaction to the publication and inserted a defensive preface which claimed that this was not a pirate copy, that the author and publishers had been "amply rewarded" and that the public would benefit from the reduced price (half that of the latest edition by

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<sup>18</sup> 2nd Letter to Messrs. William and Robert Chambers; published in *Cleave's Penny Gazette of Variety and Amusement* 12 September 1840.

<sup>19</sup> *Scottish Book Trade Index*, National Library of Scotland.

<sup>20</sup> I have relied heavily upon Richard B. Sher, *Corporatism and Consensus in the Late Eighteenth Century Book Trade: The Edinburgh Booksellers' Society in Comparative Perspective*, (*Book History* - Vol. 1, Penn State University Press, 1998), which includes an account of the Society's conflict with Mudie. The records of the Edinburgh Booksellers Society collection are in the National Library of Scotland, Manuscripts Division. Dep. 303 folder 23 contains the documents of the Mudie case and 25, item 8 is the membership roll 1792-1831). See, also, legal records in West Register House, Edinburgh – ref CS29/915/48.



the original publishers). Less convincingly, they tried to make light of the fact that their edition did not include the numerous revisions that the author had made four years earlier (and which were still copyright protected), arguing that the revisions “are not so important to the reader as to the author”. Whatever the impact of the preface, the book sold well enough to merit another production run the following year and Mudie’s syndicate went on to publish cheap editions of two other major works: James Macpherson’s *Poems of Ossian*, and David Hume’s *History of England*. They would certainly, however, have made enemies within the trade, both in London and among the Edinburgh booksellers who were comfortable with the status quo.

By 1796, Mudie senior had taken his eldest son, William, into partnership, trading as G. Mudie and Son, at 52 South Bridge, Edinburgh, where they successfully published, sold and printed medical textbooks and university theses. He was also attempting to establish a toe-hold in the London market through his second son, John Young Mudie.<sup>21</sup> In December of that year Mudie again upset the Edinburgh Booksellers’ Society by breaking another of their long-established practices, that of retail price fixing, and during the ensuing struggle with the Society his business crumbled.

Mudie and Son advertised a sale of medical books at fifteen to thirty per cent less than normal retail price. This immediately aroused the wrath of William Creech, a leading light in the Booksellers’ Society and rival seller of medical books. At a meeting at which the Mudies were not present, Creech persuaded the Society to threaten Mudie and Son with exclusion from inter-trade sales if the advertisement was not withdrawn. Matters were made worse when a second advertisement appeared, announcing an extension of the sale. The Society then set up a committee, consisting of Creech and his supporters, to inform the Mudies in person of the seriousness of the situation. Mudie senior’s response was defiant, refusing to stop the sale until its advertised end and threatening to prosecute the Society for an illegal combination. He did, however, offer to apologise to the Society for his actions.

Following legal advice that their actions had been lawful, the Society summoned the Mudies to a meeting, where they were asked to sign an agreement, stating that price fixing was in the best interests of both trade and public and that any advantage the latter would gain from competition would be short-lived. Any bookseller who breached this agreement would be subject to fine or censure by the Society. The Mudies refused to sign

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<sup>21</sup> Letter from George Mudie, senior, to John Young Mudie, 1 December 1797. See also John H. Mudie, *Mudies of Dundee, Scotland to St. Croix, Danish West Indies (1550 – 2000)* (privately published Florida, USA, 2000).



and submitted a letter to Creech saying how “cruelly” they felt they had been treated, but the meeting still voted to impose the sanctions already agreed upon.

Over the next few weeks, the Mudies discovered that the actions of Creech and his supporters had been completely unconstitutional: Society meetings had taken place without informing the Mudies, resolutions and minutes had been recorded without being signed by the chairman and secretary, and the disciplinary committee had included someone who was not even a member of the Society. In April 1797, having written in advance to members giving chapter and verse of the irregularities and securing sufficient signatures to demand a meeting, Mudie senior presented a resolution to the Society, demanding that the earlier resolutions be struck out on the grounds that they had been unconstitutional. This time, Creech and his supporters were in a minority. Their attempt to have the resolution referred to a committee for future discussion failed and all they could achieve was to delay the discussion until 6 p.m. that day. Creech sent a panicky note to one of his friends, asking for urgent help in organising a protest and, belatedly, for a copy of the Society’s regulations:

Mr Cameron is now with me. I wish you could join us for a little. If something is not done before 6 o’clock our Society is ruined, and Mudie triumphs. We are drawing up a protest, and I want your assistance. Send by the Bearer a Copy of the printed Regulations of the Society.<sup>22</sup>

The letter was to no avail. Mudie’s resolution was carried, he apologised to the Society and accepted censure from the chair, which the Society agreed was sufficient punishment. Creech’s prophesy proved groundless; the Society was not ruined and Mudie could hardly be said to have triumphed. In fact, his business began to fail almost immediately; perhaps his need to hold a sale was an indication that he was already in financial difficulties. He was borrowing money (ironically, from Creech among others) in order to pay creditors<sup>23</sup> and by October 1798 the business of G. Mudie and Son was in liquidation. His son, William, briefly carried on in his own name at the South Bridge shop and acted as trustee of his father’s creditors until he resigned that position in 1800. In that year Mudie senior was imprisoned for debt and had to sign over all his property to Creech, who had become the new trustee. He made some sort of living as an auctioneer and remained a member of the Edinburgh Booksellers’ Society until 1813,

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<sup>22</sup> *Records of the Edinburgh Booksellers Society*, quoted in Sher, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Not only his own creditors but also those of his son, John Young Mudie, whose London bookshop was in financial difficulties; see letter from George Mudie, senior, to John Young Mudie, 1 December 1797.

after which, no further record of him has surfaced.<sup>24</sup>

Young George was nine years old when his father's battle with Creech commenced and thirteen when Mudie senior was sent to the debtors' prison. In the only account of his childhood that has come to light, Mudie appears to have been proud of his father, describing him as "the most enterprising and most extensive publisher and bookseller in Scotland, of his day".<sup>25</sup> He makes no mention, however, of financial troubles, so one can only guess at how the disintegration of his father's business affected him. He may well have shared the family's anxiety as the debts mounted and his father was carted off to the Edinburgh Tolbooth. It is interesting to note that there were echoes of these events in Mudie's later life. As an adult he did not exhibit much business acumen and had to take drastic action on at least two occasions in order to avoid the debtors' prison himself. It is not known whether he witnessed his father and brother's anger at the vindictive actions of Creech while they pored over the Society's regulations to fight back. His own writings, however, clearly show that, like his father, he became angered by the abuse of power and was quick to take offence if his own character was impugned. He also shared his father's relaxed attitude towards copyright, which led him on one occasion to being on the losing side of a lawsuit involving Charles Dickens.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of the parlous state of the family finances, young George received a very good education. He attended Edinburgh High School, one

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<sup>24</sup>R. Sher, op. cit.

*The Edinburgh Advertiser* 23 Oct 1798 – Notice to Creditors and Debtors of George Mudie & Son and also George Mudie to contact William Mudie, bookseller, South St Bridge, Edinburgh.

*The Caledonian Mercury* 22 Jun 1799 – Notice to Creditors and Debtors of George Mudie & Son and also George Mudie to contact William Mudie, bookseller, South St Bridge, Edinburgh without delay or run the risk of losing a dividend, which the trustee expects he will soon be able to make.

*The Edinburgh Advertiser* 3 Oct 1800 – Notice to Creditors of George Mudie & Son and also George Mudie - meeting to replace William Mudie, who has resigned as trustee.

*The Edinburgh Advertiser* 16 Jan 1801 – Notice of sale by auction of house in Adams Square, Edinburgh belonging to George Mudie, bookseller.

*The Caledonian Mercury* 31 Mar 1806 – Advertisement for sale to be carried out by G Mudie, Auctioneer.

*The Post-Office Annual Directory, 1809, to 1810* – George Moodie, auctioneer, Roxburgh Place, Edinburgh.

<sup>25</sup>2nd Letter to Messrs. William and Robert Chambers; published in *Cleave's Penny Gazette of Variety and Amusement* 12 September 1840. Nicol, Christison and Paton all taught at Edinburgh High School during the 1790s, see W. Steven, *History of the High School of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1849).

<sup>26</sup>Dickens v. Lee, January 1844. See Chapter 10.

of the oldest-established grammar schools in Scotland, which took boys (but not girls) between the ages of six and sixteen, and where he became a

pupil of William Nicol ... and afterwards of Professor Christison, Mr McGillivray and Mr Paton, the father of the celebrated singers of that name ...<sup>27</sup>

This would have been a high-quality but demanding education. Nicol taught classics before opening his own academy. He was a brilliant scholar but also a harsh disciplinarian who administered frequent floggings. Possessed of a fiery temper, Nicol frequently quarrelled with colleagues and friends alike, including his “bosom crony” and drinking companion, Robbie Burns.<sup>28</sup> Alexander Christison taught languages, history and classics until 1805, after which he became Professor of Humanities at Edinburgh University. He appears to have been the opposite in temperament to Nicol, being well known for

the sweetness of his temper, the urbanity of his manners, his constant flow of good humour.<sup>29</sup>

Christison’s expertise covered most of the arts and some of the sciences, but he was particularly strong on literary composition and criticism, possessing the ability to reduce complicated arguments to their bare essentials.<sup>30</sup> Mudie’s own writings suggest that he may well have been influenced by both these mentors. He was conversant with both French and Latin, and well read in the subject of economics. He was highly articulate, constructing his articles and essays with precision and clarity, perhaps following Christison’s example. Like Nicol, however, he was intolerant of ill-informed or badly argued opinion and his letters and pamphlets are frequently laced with biting invective, which can be a joy to read.

Max Beer believed that Mudie did not complete his education, but provided no evidence to support this view.<sup>31</sup> Edinburgh High School was fee-paying, so it is doubtful whether Mudie senior would have been able to pay to keep young George there during his bankruptcy proceedings. However, bursaries were available for bright pupils and George could have benefitted from that. What is known however, is that by the age of nineteen he was working for a living, and that he was married.

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<sup>27</sup> 2nd Letter to Messrs. William and Robert Chambers.

<sup>28</sup> See W. Steven, op. cit.; also, M. Lindsay, *The Burns Encyclopedia* (1959), <http://www.robertburns.org/encyclopedia/NicolWilliam1744-97.680.shtml>.

<sup>29</sup> A. Brown, *Notice of the Life and Character of Alexander Christison* (1820).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> M. Beer, op. cit., p. 200.

## A talent for polemics

*I was already set down as a notorious  
malcontent, and as actuated by dangerous  
principles of disaffection.*<sup>32</sup>

The young George Mudie trained as a printer and, although he later devoted much of his time to journalism, printing was his “bread and butter” trade, to fall back on when he could find no other employment. His occupation was recorded as “Printer” when, in 1806, he married Mary Mackay in the Old Parish Church,<sup>33</sup> known locally as the Tron Kirk. The marriage did not last long and it is likely that George’s first wife died without bearing any children.<sup>34</sup> In 1812 he married Janet Jessie Esplin Forbes,<sup>35</sup> daughter of an Edinburgh merchant, and by August of that year the couple were living in Leith Street<sup>36</sup>, which was outside the Old Town but not quite in the New, suggesting that Mudie was earning just enough to get him out of the most rundown area.

It is not known when Mudie first became involved in journalism or for which newspaper he worked, but two early examples of his pamphleteering have survived. One, *A Few Particulars Respecting the Secret History of the Late Forum*, is briefly mentioned by Professor Armytage as evidence of Mudie’s unsuccessful attempt to form a newsgroup in St Andrew’s Chapel, Edinburgh,<sup>37</sup> and most historians have either followed

<sup>32</sup> G. Mudie, *A Few Particulars Respecting the Secret History of the Late Forum* (August 1812).

<sup>33</sup> Edinburgh parish records, 27 August 1806 – marriage of George Mudie, Printer, to Mary Mackay, both of Old Church Parish. His occupation is also shown as printer at his marriage to Jessie Esplin Forbes (1812), the baptisms of Forbes and Jane Mudie (1814), Baines’ *Directory of Leeds* (1817), the baptisms of Mary and David Mudie (1817), the *Scottish Book Trade Index* (1832), the Census of 1841 and the marriages of his children Forbes (1839), Robert (1839), Janet (1840) and Charles (1845) – see Appendix.

<sup>34</sup> There is no baptismal record of any children whose father was George Mudie (or Moodie) in Edinburgh between the dates of his first and second marriages. Nor is there a record of the death of a Mary Mudie during that time.

<sup>35</sup> Edinburgh parish records, 11 Apr 1812, marriage of Geo. Mudie, Printer, St Cuthbert’s Parish to Jessie Esplin Forbes, Old Church Parish, daughter of the late J. Forbes, Merchant. Edin.

<sup>36</sup> G. Mudie, *A Few Particulars Respecting the Secret History of the Late Forum* (August 1812), Preface.

<sup>37</sup> W. H. G. Armytage, op. cit., p. 214.

Armytage's account or referenced the pamphlet without comment. The other journalistic piece, *An Authentic Account Of The Trial And Execution Of John Bellingham, For The Assassination Of The Right Hon. Spencer Perceval; With A Vindication Of Sir Francis Burdett From The Aspersions Of Some Of The London Prints*, seems to have been completely overlooked. Both works provide evidence of Mudie's developing writing style and his responses to the political events of the time, which included riots in Edinburgh and the murder of the prime minister.

*A Few Particulars* was a polemic against the conduct of the organising committee of the Edinburgh Forum, a debating society which Mudie had joined. It was written after the committee ("the Junto" as he called them) had asked local magistrates to ban a public meeting at which Mudie had intended to read an essay, entitled *On the cause of the present depravity of moral character in the youth of the lower classes: with observations and reflections on the character and conduct of the unfortunate actors in the late riots in the city, and on the best means of preventing a recurrence of similar scene*. Proceeds from admission charges to the meeting were to be given to the Edinburgh Lancaster School.

Mudie gave no other details about the content of his essay, but its subject was provocative. The so called "Tron Riot" had taken place the previous new year's eve in the vicinity of the Tron Kirk, in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town. This was the traditional place for celebrating Hogmanay and many of the wealthier inhabitants of the New Town would have been among the large crowds of merry-makers. That night, however, gangs of working-class youths had gone on the rampage, committing a series of violent attacks on individuals whom they knocked down and robbed. Several of the victims were seriously injured and two, including a policeman, were bludgeoned to death. Reprisals were swift and brutal; sixty-eight youths were arrested and given exemplary sentences. Several of them were transported and three, aged between sixteen and eighteen, were hanged.<sup>38</sup>

In the aftermath of the riot there was widespread public debate about what should be done to prevent a repetition. The authorities proposed to increase police numbers, while others went so far as to suggest nightly citizen street patrols. The lack of education available to working-class children was also apparent. Although Scottish law said that there should be a school in every parish, provision of education had failed to keep pace with the rapid population expansion in the large conurbations. Church

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<sup>38</sup> *The Edinburgh Annual Register 1808-26*, Vol. 5, pt. 2. See also, Andrew G. Ralston, *The Tron Riot of 1812*, *History Today*, May 1980 (History Today Ltd) and W. W. Knox, *The Attack of the 'half-formed persons': the 1811-2 Tron Riot in Edinburgh Revisited*, *Scottish Historical Review* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

ministers therefore decided to increase Sunday school provision and to open at least one elementary school.<sup>39</sup>

For Mudie, these events would have been very close to home: he had been married in the Tron Kirk and some of the acts of violence had taken place in streets where he had lived as a child, such as South Bridge and Adam's Square.<sup>40</sup> It does not seem surprising, therefore, that he should have wanted to contribute to the debate and his proposed beneficiary of the meeting's proceeds, the Edinburgh Lancaster School, was one of the few existing establishments in the city where working-class children could receive any education at all.<sup>41</sup> His plan, however, was foiled by "the Junto", who

asserted that it was not only at variance with the principles of the Forum, but that it was hostile to those of the government of the state! and resolved to procure an interdict from the Magistrates of the city for suppressing the meeting entirely. They represented to the Magistrates that the essay was of a political nature, would give rise to political discussion, and might be the means of exciting political disaffection, disturbance and riot; and, as they knew that the production had been offensive to them, they took care to inform them, that I was the Author of the *Vindication of Sir Francis Burdett*, annexed to an edition of Bellingham's Trial, published in Edinburgh, for which I was already set down as a notorious malcontent, and as actuated by dangerous principles of disaffection.<sup>42</sup>

Even if the magistrates had consented to the subject of Mudie's essay, they would have seen red at the mention of Sir Francis Burdett, the radical MP for Westminster and darling of the London mob. Burdett had been a thorn in the side of the establishment for fifteen years, having opposed the war with France and the suspension of *habeas corpus* in 1796, campaigned for improved prison conditions and supported parliamentary reform by the abolition of "rotten boroughs." He had even been imprisoned in the Tower of London for breaching parliamentary privilege and, for some, his name was synonymous with sedition.

Mudie accused "the Junto" of having an ulterior motive for wanting to suppress the meeting, which was to cover up their embezzlement of Forum funds and to close down the Society before their crimes came to light. He

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<sup>39</sup> Irene Maver, *Nocturnal representations of urban Scotland in the nineteenth century*, in *Night-Time and Sleep in Asia and the West*, Brigitte Steger and Lodewijk Brunt, Eds. (2003). Also, *History of Professional Training at Moray House*, University of Edinburgh ([www.ed.ac.uk](http://www.ed.ac.uk)).

<sup>40</sup> *The Edinburgh Annual Register* 1808-26, Vol. 5, pt. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Mudie would later support far more progressive educational methods than Lancaster's; see below, Chapter 5.

<sup>42</sup> G. Mudie, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

had proposed a series of similar debates in order to keep the Society going. Whether or not this was true, the reactionary forces in society, then as now,<sup>43</sup> believed that repression was the only means necessary to maintain public order. The magistrates would have needed little persuasion from Forum officials to ban a public discussion whose main speaker referred to the rioters as “unfortunate actors” and whose proceeds were going to help educate them. The meeting was duly suppressed and the Forum then split into two rival organisations.<sup>44</sup>

Mudie claimed that he had been threatened with court proceedings if he published *A Few Particulars* and hoped that by doing so the magistrates would perceive what he took to be the real motives behind the actions of the Forum’s officials. Somewhat disingenuously, he added, referring to himself,

In truth, there is not in the country, perhaps, a man more ignorant of politics, or who gives himself less concern with political questions or measures.<sup>45</sup>

The pamphlet is nearly forty pages long and tends to get bogged down in the minutiae of the Forum’s internal affairs. But it meant a lot to Mudie, who later looked back on his time with the Forum as an important training ground, where he learned the art of public speaking:

– one of the founders and an active supporter of the Edinburgh Forum, (while I was yet little more than a boy), in conjunction with its “originator” Joseph Robertson<sup>46</sup>, now and for many years back editor of one of the most useful magazines in London, and with Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd<sup>47</sup>, McDairmid of the Dumfries Courier, the truly eloquent speaker and profound scholar Mr Hunter, whose eloquence has flowed as a stream of nectar ... I was early prepared for the part I have had in conducting a portion of the public press of the country.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “What we have experienced in London and elsewhere since Saturday night is a wholly new phenomenon: violent disorder whose sole intent is criminal ... In such circumstances, there can be only one response if the law-abiding majority is to be protected: the thugs must be taught to respect the law of the land the hard way.” *Daily Telegraph*, Editorial on the Tottenham Riots, 9 August 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Douglas S. Mack (Ed.) *Collected Letters of James Hogg*, Vol. 1, (Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 128.

<sup>45</sup> G. Mudie, op. cit., Preface.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Clinton Robertson was a political radical who later founded and edited *The Mechanic’s Magazine*.

<sup>47</sup> James Hogg, who used the pen-name “The Ettrick Shepherd”, was a poet and novelist whose works are still in print.

<sup>48</sup> G. Mudie, 2nd Letter to Messrs. William and Robert Chambers, published in *Cleave’s Penny Gazette of Variety and Amusement*, 12 September 1840.



Mudie's view of the Forum's importance was not universally shared. In a vituperative letter to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review* it was described as "a weekly congregation of the most intrepid idiots that ever brayed in public",<sup>49</sup> while according to "H.C.",

The Edinburgh Forum was an institution for public discussion; open to all who paid a shilling at the door. It was a very stupid, vulgar convocation, presided over by a Chairman in a black gown, and remarkably dull and moral ... This Geo. Mudie is the person (as I understand) who has since gone to London and published *The Modern Athens*, London, and various other personal and vulgar works. This statement about the dissolution of the Forum cannot be trusted to. The truth rather is that neither its existence nor demise made any public impression and it went out by a natural decline of which the obscurity was worthy of the excessive dullness of its life.<sup>50</sup>

Mudie's sixty-page pamphlet on the Bellingham trial, including Burdett's "vindication", was published in May or June 1812 and is still in print.<sup>51</sup> It was written, doubtless, to cash in on the enormous public interest in what would have been regarded as the trial of the century. John Bellingham had shot dead the prime minister, Spencer Perceval, in the lobby of the House of Commons. Bellingham's motives had been personal, not political: he blamed the government for failing to protect him from being imprisoned in Russia for debts incurred as a result of a failed business venture. When his petition to the House of Commons was rejected he murdered Perceval as an act of revenge, making no attempt to escape and submitting stoically to his inevitable trial, conviction and execution.

Mudie's account is a good piece of journalism. He let the events of the dramatic story speak for themselves and, apart from a few opening remarks on how violent modern society had become, resisted the temptation to over-sensationalise or attempt to make political points. He demonstrated a good eye for detail and a light, humorous touch in his description of the crowd who turned up to watch Bellingham's execution:

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<sup>49</sup> *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review* August 1821, pp. 46-47. The letter was a review of James Hogg's *Memoirs* and its anonymous author condemned Hogg and the Forum in terms of pure snobbery.

<sup>50</sup> Handwritten insertion in the British Library copy of *A Few Particulars*. Armytage, op. cit., identifies H.C. as Lord Henry Cockburn. H.C. was misinformed about the authorship of *The Modern Athens*, which was written by Robert Mudie, who later became editor of *The Sunday Times*, (*Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 13).

<sup>51</sup> Anon., *An Authentic Account Of The Trial And Execution Of John Bellingham, For The Assassination Of The Right Hon. Spencer Perceval; With A Vindication Of Sir Francis Burdett From The Aspersions Of Some Of The London Prints*, 1812 (Gale, Making of Modern Law Print Editions).



... as the morning was so wet, there was a general display of umbrellas, which might be justly assimilated with the appearance of the Roman *testudo*, when the soldiers advanced to battle with their shields above their heads. But the protection thus afforded to an individual becomes an intolerable nuisance to his neighbour in a crowd, and while those who, as they concluded, had prudently brought umbrellas, were protected from the rain, their unprotected neighbours began to feel the drops trickle down their necks from the umbrellas, and “Down with the umbrellas!” soon became general. As many neglected to obey the admonition, considerable confusion ensued, until the obstinate were reduced to acquiescence with the demand of the majority, by the destruction of the umbrellas.<sup>52</sup>

The Burdett section takes up the final section of the pamphlet. It was a polemic, more sharply written than *A Few Particulars*, against comments made by certain newspapers, particularly *The Courier*, which had attempted to link Bellingham’s crime to Burdett’s politics. When the news of Perceval’s death became public, a crowd had gathered outside the Houses of Parliament, some of whom had cheered Bellingham as he was being taken to prison and shouted out “Burdett for ever”. Similarly, in Nottingham “a mob paraded the town with music and flags, huzzaing and *feu-de-joies*”.<sup>53</sup>

In a series of articles *The Courier* had blamed “inflammatory speeches and writings” for the crowd’s behaviour:

May not such inflammatory language have encouraged – indeed, is it calculated to encourage, in ignorant and uninformed men, that savageness of feeling which has produced such atrocities in distant parts of the country, and that consummation of wickedness which we are now deploring in London.<sup>54</sup>

*The Courier* had even gone so far as to claim that Bellingham’s manner and appearance were very similar to Burdett’s:

“He” [Bellingham] “is much more like a celebrated baronet, the most violent in politics, than any of the prints make him. He was indeed as like him in his general appearance and manner altogether, as ever we observed one man like another.”<sup>55</sup>

Mudie was incensed by *The Courier*’s blatant attempt to assassinate Burdett’s character and launched a stinging counter-attack:

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p 53.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p 52.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p 61.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p 61.

Since *The Courier* is so free in its observations; since, not satisfied with misrepresenting his own actions, and falsifying and opposing his political principles, it must endeavour to attach to him part of the stigma arising from the action of another – from the action which is perhaps the blackest and most atrocious that ever was committed – we shall be pardoned for saying a few words in vindication of his character.<sup>56</sup>

He made clear his abhorrence of Bellingham's crime and disapproval of the reactions of the mob, but also showed an understanding of the hatred they felt for the murdered prime minister, Perceval, whose oppressive policies were widely unpopular:

And is it to be wondered at, that men unenlightened by knowledge, little softened by feelings of humanity, and smarting under an accumulation of the severest evils, including even the danger of starvation itself, from the want of employment, should feel a brutal impulse of momentary joy, and demonstrate that joy publicly, on learning that the supposed cause of all their miseries was removed, by *whatever means* the removal might have been effected?<sup>57</sup>

He accused *The Courier* of hypocrisy in its condemnation of the rejoicing of the mob, when it had publicly supported a suggestion that the Emperor Napoleon should be assassinated, thus bringing itself down to Bellingham's own level:

The writers of *The Courier* know Bonaparte to be a tyrant, and therefore they would, like Bellingham, rejoice at his *assassination* – What a coincidence!!! – Away! ye canting hypocritical miscreants, ye Bellinghams, who have dared to stigmatize one of the most virtuous of your contemporaries with consequences which are perhaps the result of the dangerous and diabolical principles which ye yourselves have disseminated! Instead of yourselves, you must make Sir Francis Burdett the cause of the disgraceful proceedings of the populace, for disgraceful, though natural, they certainly are, and you must calumniate a man possessing all the finer sensibilities of human nature, and who has on more than one occasion shown himself an enemy to tumultuary proceedings of the people.<sup>58</sup>

Although Mudie stated that he did not necessarily agree with Burdett's politics and had been motivated solely by indignation at the injustice of *The Courier's* comments, he clearly had considerable respect for him and his views:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p 62.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p 62.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p 64.

But how are the speeches of Sir Francis Burdett inflammatory? Has he ever exhorted the people to outrage and violence? Unless truth is inflammatory, his speeches cannot be so, for his arguments being for the most part founded upon facts, his assertions and his speeches are distinguished only for their eloquence, energy, and truth. And because this truth is for the most part offensive to, and is disregarded by, the present ministry, you must insinuate that it is this eloquence, this truth, which have occasioned so much mischief, so much national disgrace, and so great a stigma upon humanity.<sup>59</sup>

He ended with a flourish:

Had any violent outrage been committed on Sir Francis Burdett, would *The Courier* have been willing to admit, that it was owing to their noisy invective against him? No. But if the populace had demonstrated satisfaction at his assassination, there can be no doubt that *The Courier* would have applauded their discernment and their zeal, in rejoicing at the removal of a man whom they affect to consider dangerous, and an enemy of the true interests of his country.<sup>60</sup>

The two pamphlets of 1812 show Mudie to be a fluent, erudite writer with a polemicist's ability to spot weaknesses in his opponent's argument. In spite of his claim to be ignorant of politics, he demonstrated an interest in, and understanding of, the local and national political events of the time, instinctively empathizing with the working class and showing admiration for a prominent radical MP. In the Burdett pamphlet he made it clear that he deplored mob violence, but at the same time, tried to understand what drove people to riot. Although his banned speech to the Edinburgh Forum has not survived, its title hints that he may well have been planning to express similar views about the Tron riot. Such ideas would have been regarded by the authorities as verging on seditious and Mudie gives the impression that he rather enjoyed his notoriety as an anti-establishment figure. Like his father, he was prepared to challenge abuses of power, real or imagined, and was clearly no respecter of authority.

According to Armytage, Mudie moved to London as a result of his quarrel with the Forum, while Beer says that he "gradually drifted into journalism", working on a Glasgow newspaper in 1818 or 1819,<sup>61</sup> but there is no evidence to support either of these contentions. Whether Mudie was employed as a journalist on an Edinburgh newspaper or whether he was a freelance pamphleteer is not known, but in 1812, at the age of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p 65.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p 65. In later life, both as the editor of a Tory provincial newspaper and a staunch Owenite, Mudie would take a harder line against those who held radical views.

<sup>61</sup> W. H. G. Armytage, op. cit., p. 214. M. Beer, op. cit., p. 200.

## The Hidden Oak

twenty-five, he had enough talent and experience to be offered a job as editor of a provincial newspaper and the next stage of his career took him firstly to Nottingham, and then on to Leeds

## Working for the Tory press

*This attack is so like a choleric Scotchman –  
to strike first, and think afterwards.*<sup>62</sup>

Towards the end of 1812 Mudie took up a post as editor<sup>63</sup> of a new weekly paper, *The Nottingham Gazette and Political, Literary, Agricultural & Commercial Register for the Midland Counties*, whose first issue appeared on 1 January 1813. He remained in Nottingham until *The Gazette* folded in mid-1815, after which he worked in Leeds for five years, firstly as editor of *The Leeds Intelligencer* and then publishing his own papers. During this period he and his wife Jessy started a family. Their first two children, Forbes and Jane, were baptised in Nottingham in 1814; two more, Mary and David, baptised in Leeds in 1817; and a fifth, Robert Owen Mudie, was born in Leeds in 1819 or 1820.<sup>64</sup>

Throughout Mudie's time in Nottingham and Leeds the political and economic climate was dominated by war and its aftermath. Britain and France had been at war between 1793 and 1802, and again from 1803 to 1815. For good measure, the years 1812 to 1814 also saw war with the USA. The demands of war had caused a large increase in the national debt, higher taxation (including the introduction of income tax), a scarcity of precious metal for coinage and the introduction of paper money. In spite of trade fluctuations these were boom times for the new capitalist manufacturers. The industrial revolution was in full swing and the introduction of new machinery, which went hand in hand with reductions in wages, dramatically increased the profits that could be made, especially when there were lucrative army supply contracts to be had and export markets could be enforced by trade blockades.<sup>65</sup>

The government of the day was Tory, led by Lord Liverpool. It represented the aristocratic landowning class, whose income was derived mainly from rent, and its attitude to the poor was paternalistic: looking after them as long as they behaved themselves but quickly resorting to repression if they did not. The interests of the rising mercantile middle class were represented mainly by the Whig Party, who favoured free trade

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<sup>62</sup> W. Headley, letter to *The Leeds Intelligencer* 6 December 1819.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to Lord Sidmouth, 19 July 1820.

<sup>64</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>65</sup> A monumental account of these years is in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin, 1963), on which this section heavily relies.

and limited parliamentary reform. The working classes, however, had no vote, nor a political party of their own; in fact, Sir Francis Burdett aside, they had little support inside Parliament.

Extra-parliamentary agitation was led by various radical groups, holding a variety of political positions, such as libertarian Tories, parliamentary reformers, land redistributors and supporters of the French Jacobins. Their antecedents included Tom Paine, William Godwin and Thomas Spence. Their common enemy was “Old Corruption”: rule by a self-perpetuating elite who maintained their grip on power by political patronage and rigged elections. Their leading voices were public speakers: Burdett, Major John Cartwright, Henry Hunt, and newspaper editors: William Cobbett (*Political Register*), T. J. Wooler (*Black Dwarf*) and Richard Carlile (*The Republican*). Most of these were middle class reformers who tried to unite with a working class audience around a programme of universal suffrage, lower taxation and repeal of repressive laws. More extreme were the “Spencean Philanthropists”,<sup>66</sup> who advocated land redistribution and armed uprisings.

Much repressive legislation had been on the statute books since the 1790s, when the government, fearful of the spread of republican and democratic ideas in the wake of the French Revolution, had mounted a concerted attack on freedom of speech and individual liberty. To write or speak in favour of a British republic was treasonable; to stir up “hatred or contempt” of the government or constitution was illegal; public meetings of more than fifty people could only take place if authorised by a magistrate; imprisonment without trial was widespread during periods when *habeas corpus* was suspended; it was illegal to combine with others in order to promote political reform or interfere with trade. Radical groups such as the London Corresponding Society ceased to function and numerous radical activists were either prosecuted for sedition or simply imprisoned without trial. Trade unions were banned, but existed in a twilight world of clandestine meetings, secret initiation ceremonies and codes of silence.

Mudie’s new job took him to an area of major industrial unrest. Nottingham was the centre of the hosiery industry and a Luddite stronghold. The years 1811 and 1812 had been marked by numerous riots and large-scale destruction of machinery, for which the government took fierce reprisals. In 1812 seven Nottingham Luddites had been transported for life, while the following year seventeen were hanged in York. Although the number of disturbances decreased, the fear of Luddism still prevailed amongst the

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<sup>66</sup> The followers of Thomas Spence (1750-1814) included James Watson, one of the leaders of the Spa Fields Riot, Robert Wedderburn, son of a slave who founded the journal *The Forlorn Hope*, and Arthur Thistlewood, who was hanged in 1820 for leading the Cato Street Conspiracy. Also, Thomas Preston – see below, Chapter 13.

middle and upper classes.

Given Mudie's previous attempts to understand why people were motivated to riot, and that he had specifically mentioned Nottingham rioters in his *Vindication of Sir Francis Burdett*, it would have seemed logical for him to get a job on a paper with similar views to his own. But he did the opposite. The few available references to *The Nottingham Gazette's* history seem to support Roy Church's view that it was a shrill publication "whose editorial column frequently bordered on libel in its expression of fanatical Tory views".<sup>67</sup> *The Gazette* had been founded specifically as an anti-Luddite publication, to counteract the influence of press coverage that was more sympathetic towards the workers. One of its owners, Richard Easton, was a hosiery manufacturer and therefore directly threatened by Luddism. Another, Lewis Allsopp, had approached the Tory home secretary, Lord Sidmouth, to ask for his patronage and support.<sup>68</sup>

One wonders why Mudie made such an apparently odd career move. It is, of course, perfectly possible that he had simply changed his political views, from mildly liberal to reactionary Tory. Alternatively, it may have been professional pragmatism: *The Gazette* had offered him a job and he was content to leave his politics at home when he went to work. There is some resonance in the latter interpretation, as in later years he would keep separate his personal and professional views. The mainstream newspapers that he edited would be either Tory-leaning or middle of the road, while he would confine his anti-capitalist economic writings to specifically Owenite publications.

*The Gazette* engaged in a war of words with *The Nottingham Review*, whose proprietor and editor, Charles Sutton, was liberal in politics, Methodist in religion and pro-Luddite. *The Review* gave as good as it got and, after *The Gazette* had suggested that a reward of £5,000 should be offered to any Luddite who was prepared to betray the secrets of his organisation, Sutton printed a satirical letter, supposedly from "General Ludd", the fictitious commander of the Luddites, which said that his son Ned had joined the British army in America, where he had carried out acts of vandalism far in excess of anything he had done as a Luddite. "Ludd" noted wryly that *The Gazette* had condemned his son earlier, but fully supported him now. Sutton was to pay a heavy price for printing the letter: Allsopp reported him to the home secretary, who prosecuted him for criminal libel. At his trial, Sutton's defence counsel argued that the "captious manner" of *The Gazette* invited ridicule and that the letter was

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<sup>67</sup> R. Church, *Economic and Social Change in a Midland Town: Victorian Nottingham 1815-1900* (Routledge, 1966).

<sup>68</sup> A. Aspinall, *Politics and the Press c1780 to 1850* (Home and Van Thal, 1949), p.150.

merely part of the ongoing squabble between the two papers. The jury, however, took a dim view of the implied slur on the British army; Sutton was found guilty and sentenced to a year's imprisonment. *The Gazette*, however, was in no position to crow about the result: it had gone out of business a few weeks before the trial.<sup>69</sup>

How much material Mudie actually contributed to *The Gazette* is not known. The only reference to his job on the paper is in his letter to Lord Sidmouth of 1820, where he claimed that he had been its editor. He may, however, have exaggerated his status. In some accounts of *The Gazette*'s history Richard Eaton is named both as its editor and its proprietor, while at Sutton's trial the owner of *The Gazette* was said to be a Mr Tupman<sup>70</sup>, and that it was he who had been the object of the "Ludd" satire. Given the circumstances under which *The Gazette* had commenced, it seems probable that the paper's political stance and tone had been set by Eaton, Tupman and others, with Mudie being brought in to add his polemical skills to their agenda. If he had any thoughts about showing a modicum of sympathy towards the Luddites, as he had with the Tron rioters, they were quickly put aside, and when *The Gazette* folded Mudie appeared to have no qualms about becoming the editor of a long-established paper whose politics were very similar: *The Leeds Intelligencer*.

His tenure at *The Intelligencer* coincided with a disastrous recession which followed the ending of the war. Demand for manufactured goods dropped, foreign competition increased and large numbers of ex-soldiers now returned home and were unable to find work. Manufacturers laid off labourers, whose wages cost them more than their machinery did, so more and more people became unemployed and had to depend on parish relief, administered under the Elizabethan Poor Law.<sup>71</sup> Since the introduction of the Speenhamland system<sup>72</sup> in the 1790s the amount of relief had often been linked to the price of bread, so when, in order to protect landowners from cheap imports of corn, the government introduced the Corn Laws in 1815, both the price of bread and the amount of "poor's rates" remained artificially high. To make matters worse for the less well-off, Parliament

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<sup>69</sup> *The London Statesman*, 31 July 1815; J. F. Sutton, *The Date Book of Remarkable and Memorable Events Connected with Nottingham and its Neighbourhood 1750-1850* (London, 1852); Sutton papers, National Archives DD/764; K. Binfield (Ed.) *Writings of the Luddites* (John Hopkins University Press, 2004); C. Steedman, *An Everyday Life of the English Working Class* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>70</sup> According to Steedman, op. cit., he was Samuel Tupman, a local bookseller and printer. *The Nottingham Date Book* gives his first name as William.

<sup>71</sup> See below, Chapter 9.

<sup>72</sup> Named after the village where the local magistrates devised the system. It was not universally adopted.



forced the government to abolish income tax, which simply transferred the burden from direct to indirect taxation. The plight of the poor became desperate after a very bad harvest in 1816:

starvation walked through the land, producing the inevitable reaction in hunger-riots, machine-breaking and other spontaneous outbursts of popular misery.<sup>73</sup>

This in turn caused many sections of the upper and middle classes to fear for their lives and property and, with the costs of poor relief also spiralling upwards, sympathy for those who were starving began to evaporate. Their penury, some opined, was their own fault and they needed to be taught a lesson:

The great object should be to teach the labouring classes that they must themselves provide for those casualties to which they are exposed from occasional variations in the demand for particular manufactured goods.<sup>74</sup>

The years 1816 to 1820 were marked by widespread riots and disaffection. Although Luddite activity had died down, there were numerous public meetings in support of political reform. One such, at Spa Fields in 1816, turned into a riot organised by the Spenceans. Its leaders were charged with high treason, but their trial collapsed when the activities of a government *agent provocateur* were revealed. The government promptly suspended *habeas corpus* again and reintroduced the Corresponding Act, banning all communication between political organisations. Another mass meeting, at St Peter's Field, Manchester (1819), was brutally attacked by local militia and entered the history books as the "Peterloo Massacre".<sup>75</sup> There was an attempted insurrection in Pentrich, Derbyshire (1817) and the Cato Street Conspiracy (1820), which aimed to assassinate the cabinet.

*The Intelligencer* had no time for radicalism and was not interested in the subtle differences between its reformist and revolutionary wings, regarding all as equally seditious. It campaigned vigorously in support of the government during the period following the Spa Fields riot, writing strongly worded editorials on behalf of king and constitution and signing the "Leeds Declaration", which urged

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<sup>73</sup> G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People* (Methuen, 1946).

<sup>74</sup> David Ricardo, *Letter to Trower*, 26 January 1818.

<sup>75</sup> Estimates of the number of casualties vary. Between ten and twenty were killed and hundreds wounded.

## The Hidden Oak

ALL His Majesty's faithful Subjects, to Unite, and to quell the Spirit of Rebellion, by opposing to it the firm and dauntless Front of Loyalty.<sup>76</sup>

It did, however, regard most radicals as “fools rather than knaves” who had

imbibed the poisons of Cobbett and a few other designing villains, and are, unconsciously, the tools of a revolutionary Junto, the horrors mediated by which they would tremble to contemplate.<sup>77</sup>

Any newspaper which took a different line was attacked, including *The Times* (“a London organ of Disaffection”), which had called *The Intelligencer* “a contemptible country newspaper”.<sup>78</sup> One of Mudie's prime targets was Edward Baines, editor of *The Intelligencer's* rival, *The Leeds Mercury*, who took a liberal stance on the issues of the day. In a virtual replay of *The Gazette's* propaganda war with *The Nottingham Review*, hardly a week went by without a scathing “exposure” of any alleged inconsistency in *The Mercury's* political line; and Mudie poked fun at Baines's use of court proceedings to reduce the agreed purchase price of a pro-government Liverpool paper that he was taking over:

It seems that the Leeds Demagogue wishes to have Loyalty in Liverpool, as cheap as possible: aye, aye, a pretty specimen of the “disinterested” generosity and patriotism, which he is continually trumpeting forth.<sup>79</sup>

Whether or not he privately agreed with *The Intelligencer's* line, Mudie seems to have relished his task. He was a good editor and *The Intelligencer* was a lively provincial newspaper, full of local news, anecdotes, poetry and copious cuttings from the London, foreign and other provincial papers. These were all delivered at high speed, often with no more than a one-line break between reports, giving the impression that Mudie's newsdesk was overflowing with stories to tell. He possessed the good journalist's ability to make something out of very little material:

Haddocks are at present so numerous on the Northumberland coast, that they have been sold in Newcastle market, large ones for a ½d. each, and 4 or 5 smaller ones for a 1d. – The late extraordinary supplies of fish have proved a

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<sup>76</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 3 February 1817.

<sup>77</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 14 April 1817. Mudie's antipathy towards Cobbett continued long after he stopped working for Tory papers; see below, Chapters 6 and 9.

<sup>78</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 21 July 1817.

<sup>79</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 14 April 1817. Mudie's desire to outwit Baines sometimes clouded his judgement, as when he protested the innocence of the government spy, Oliver, long after Baines and others had exposed him as an agent provocateur; *The Leeds Intelligencer* 15 December 1817, 2 and 23 February 1818.

very great blessing to the lower classes of the community, many of whom were almost starving; and it cannot fail to fill the reflecting mind with gratitude to the Common Parent of the Universe.<sup>80</sup>

He also had a biting sense of humour, demonstrated when he recounted that a gentleman “of great respectability” had accused Ann Lyons, a prostitute, of robbing him of his clothes:

It appeared that the gentleman accompanied Lyons home to her lodgings in Wapping, but on getting up in the morning to dress himself, he found all his clothes were stolen. He applied to the Lady Abbess, who not being able to procure any others, offered him the use of some of her own apparel, which, from necessity, he accepted. Thus ludicrously equipped in the paraphernalia of an old b\*\*d, the “respectable” gentleman made a hasty retreat from the shrine of Venus in Wapping, to his hotel in St James’s!<sup>81</sup>

Mudie appears to have had a good relationship with *The Intelligencer*’s owner, Griffith Wright, and named one of his children after him.<sup>82</sup> However, Wright died in October 1818 and his son, Griffith Wright junior, disposed of the paper. In his editorial farewell, Wright remarked that the new owners, W. Gawtress & Co., had “*engaged the same editor*” (his italics) who had then

violated his engagements with Messrs W. G. & Co. and has issued a prospectus, in direct opposition to their interests.<sup>83</sup>

Just what engagements Mudie had with the new owners may never be known and perhaps they had wrongly assumed that he was content to be transferred over to them. Wright, however, seemed annoyed and Gawtress & Co. were seriously alarmed.<sup>84</sup> The same edition of *The Intelligencer* carried a prospectus for a new weekly paper, *The Leeds Independent* and *York County Advertiser*, to commence on 7 January under the joint ownership of William Headley and George Mudie. They praised the success of the two existing papers and denied that they were motivated by any malice towards their rival proprietors, but they believed that Leeds was expanding fast enough to support a third paper and wanted to try

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<sup>80</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 28 October 1816.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Mary Griffith Mudie – see Appendix.

<sup>83</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 14 December 1818

<sup>84</sup> They were right to be so – *The Morning Chronicle* of 20 November 1827 reported a law suit between Griffith Wright and Gawtress & Co. concerning the failure of *The Leeds Intelligencer* to stay profitable after the sale. The judge made it clear that he attributed the decline in sales to Mudie’s departure.

their luck. In spite of Headley and Mudie's attempt to pour oil on troubled waters, there was certainly some ill feeling towards the new paper. Two weeks later they placed an advertisement in *The Intelligencer* which, amongst the usual expressions of thanks to advertisers and supporters, included a rather paranoid claim that someone was trying to sabotage the new publication:

Since the publication of their prospectus, public and private slander has been busy with their names; their agents have been tampered with; and many secret engines employed to impede their progress.<sup>85</sup>

Mudie's association with Headley and *The Independent* lasted less than nine months and only one copy of the paper survives from that period. It includes an account of the second of two large and boisterous public meetings about political reform, which had recently taken place on Hunslet Moor. The article's tone is measured and non-inflammatory, defending the crowd's behaviour from some of the more exaggerated accounts that had appeared in the London press:

Everything in the town and neighbourhood remains perfectly tranquil; and while we confess that we entertain serious apprehensions that a misguided multitude of our fellow subjects will be ultimately betrayed into acts of outrage which must end in their own destruction, we cannot too strongly reprobate the exaggerated statements which have been put forth by some of the London papers. It has been asserted that the cap of liberty was paraded through the streets of Leeds – that the adjacent towns were in a state of tumult – and that everything was ripe for an extensive insurrection.<sup>86</sup>

What Mudie did not mention, however, was that both he and Edward Baines, of *The Mercury*, had been verbally abused by one of the speakers, a Mr Petrie, for being anti-radical. Mudie had previously sharply criticised Petrie, who now offered to fight him:

I come now to notice Mr Mudie's conduct towards me, which appears that he would either recommend me as a fit inhabitant of one of My Lord Sidmouth's solitary dungeons, for speaking the truth, or otherwise to recommend me to your fury, for being a spy ... if he feels any disposition to put my bravery to the proof, I will with pleasure gratify his wishes<sup>87</sup>

That *The Independent's* attitude towards the radicals should be little different to that of *The Intelligencer* is logical: Mudie would have been

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<sup>85</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 28 December 1818.

<sup>86</sup> *The Leeds Independent*, 1 July 1819.

<sup>87</sup> *The Leeds Mercury*, 26 June 1819.

well known locally as the editor of a hard-line Tory paper and would have had difficulty in maintaining credibility had he moderated his line. It also indicates that *The Independent* was competing for the same readership as *The Intelligencer*, rather than that of *The Mercury*.

If little information remains about *The Independent's* content, the story of the acrimonious break-up of Headley and Mudie's partnership has been preserved in all its unpleasant detail, in, of all papers, *The Intelligencer*, whose owners could not have believed their luck as their rivals tore each other apart in public.<sup>88</sup> It started quietly enough, with a press announcement by Headley and Mudie that they had dissolved their partnership by mutual consent. Headley was now the sole proprietor of *The Independent* and would be dealing with all debts due to and from the partnership. The only hint of friction was a second note from Mudie, distancing himself from "certain passages" in the latest issue and saying that he had lost control of the paper some time before the partnership had ceased.<sup>89</sup>

The affair went quiet for a few weeks but boiled over after the partnership's financial settlement had been finalised. Headley placed advertisements in *The Mercury* and *The Intelligencer* saying that Mudie had drawn "for his private use" a bill of exchange of £200 on the partnership account three days before the dissolution, which he had not mentioned during the legal proceedings to establish the financial entitlement of each partner. If there were any other bills in existence, Headley asked to be informed of them. The dam burst. In an emotional response Mudie accused Headley of trying to crush him. He acknowledged that he had drawn the bill but had done so under extreme duress after Headley, without any prior warning, had threatened him with committal to debtors' prison if he did not consent to the dissolution of the partnership. He had only intended to use the bill in an emergency; to support his family in the event of his being sent to prison. He had lodged it with a friend on the understanding that it was not to go into circulation and was "surprised and distressed by its unexpected reappearance".<sup>90</sup>

Now things got really nasty. Referring to Mudie's "numerous mis-statements" and claiming that "Forebearance on my part now would be weakness", Headley launched a full-blooded attack on Mudie's character. Mudie, he said, had been heavily in debt when the partnership was formed

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<sup>88</sup> This account is based on the statements made by both parties in *The Leeds Intelligencer* on 29 November, 6 December and 13 December 1819. For a more detailed account see G. D. Lumb, J. B. Place and F. Beckwith, *Extracts from The Leeds Intelligencer and The Leeds Mercury, 1777-1782, with an introductory account of The Leeds Intelligencer, 1754-1866* (Thoresby Society, Vol. 40, 1955).

<sup>89</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 27 September 1819.

<sup>90</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 29 November 1819.

and Headley had bailed him out

to relieve him from those embarrassments, and that he might appear in the world as my partner and appear respectable.<sup>91</sup>

The partnership agreement had stipulated that Mudie would “devote the whole of his time and attention to it” but, said Headley, Mudie only kept his half of the bargain for about three months, after which “he began to absent himself regularly, two or three days a week”, causing frequent quarrels between them. After an attempt at mediation, Mudie had,

for reasons which he has never yet stated, absented himself entirely from the business, and left Leeds. I was informed, he was enjoying himself in the way jovial men generally do – with his glass and a merry friend; receiving partnership monies and appropriating the same to his own use.<sup>92</sup>

Mudie was now trying to set up a rival newspaper and Headley, although he denied that he was motivated by a desire to scupper it, could not resist the opportunity:

That Mr M should make such assertions by wholesale, paying no regard to truth, is not at all surprising, when it is considered that his character – his reputation – nay, his political existence, depend on the ultimate impression made on the public mind, and also on the minds of his numerous intended partners, who by the bye must feel rather uneasy ... This attack is so like a choleric Scotchman – to strike first, and think afterwards, why he has done so, that I am not surprised at it; but it is rather unhappy in Mr Mudie, who is so shortly to make his debut as an Editor.<sup>93</sup>

In response, Mudie alleged that the agreement, under which he promised to devote all of his time to *The Independent*, had been suddenly put in front of him to sign “in a tavern, after circulating wine freely”(!), and that at the settlement hearing, Headley’s own solicitor had thought this to be “highly improper”. He denied being absent from the business for more than fifteen days in total, and said that Headley had in fact been with him on half of those occasions.<sup>94</sup>

There was much more besides: the break between the two men was so complete that neither could say anything without the other contradicting him, and it is hard to disentangle the rights and wrongs of the affair. Headley was probably not the cold-blooded manipulator that Mudie

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<sup>91</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 6 December 1819.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 6 and 13 December 1819.

claimed he was, but he does not seem to have viewed the partnership as between equals. He gives the impression of regarding Mudie as bought and paid for and was not prepared to tolerate any perceived shortcomings in his partner's behaviour. If Mudie was the fraudster that Headley accused him of being, it is difficult to see how he thought he could get away with it as all the partnership's debts were being referred to Headley. Whatever Mudie's motives may have been for the drawing of the bill, it gave Headley a golden opportunity to damage his reputation, both as a businessman and, particularly, as a newspaper editor. Mudie now had many enemies in Leeds who would be quick to condemn him in print at any opportunity.<sup>95</sup>

The only certainty was that both Mudie and Headley thought that *The Independent* was doing well enough for each to offer to buy the other out. It was Headley who kept *The Independent*, which survived until 1826, (under different ownership after Headley died in 1822).<sup>96</sup> Mudie, together with some new partners, set up another newspaper, *The Leeds Gazette*, which commenced on 5 January 1820. If, as Headley and Mudie had predicted, Leeds was able to support three weekly newspapers, it certainly could not support a fourth and *The Gazette* was wound up after barely four months, leaving a string of unpaid creditors in its wake. At this point Mudie left Leeds, never to return, and headed for London. Headley, doubtless, would have claimed to have been vindicated!<sup>97</sup>

The reason for Mudie's absences, which had triggered the whole row, was never clarified. There is independent evidence that he was good at his job,<sup>98</sup> but he appears to have taken his eye off the ball by devoting insufficient time to editing *The Independent*. One possible explanation lies in his growing involvement with Robert Owen's campaign for the "amelioration of the poor". In the next chapter it will be argued that Mudie was the author of a lengthy Owenite pamphlet, which was published in London

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<sup>95</sup> See below, Chapter 7.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Henry Timperley, *A Dictionary of Printers and Printing* (1839).

<sup>97</sup> Court cases rumbled on over the next few years, all gleefully reported in *The Intelligencer*. In 1822 Mudie and five of his partners were sued for £377 over the purchase of printing type, but because the prosecution could not prove when the partnership had been set up, only £47 damages was awarded. Similarly, in 1824 Mudie and eleven other partners in *The Gazette* were sued for £230 for unpaid stationery bills. This was lost on a similar technicality, as the prosecution was unable to prove that all of the defendants had actually been partners in the business, causing the judge to comment "this was one of the consequences of giving credit to we did not know who!". At one point, Mudie even sued his old boss, Griffith Wright, for unpaid wages. The suit was unsuccessful and Wright's barrister called it "one of the most barefaced attempts to extort money that ever was brought into any court of justice". See *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 29 July 1822, 4 March 1824 and 20 August 1821.

<sup>98</sup> See above, p. 29, note 84.

in 1818. If this is true it may account for his neglect of his and Headley's business. Mudie had first met Robert Owen in 1816, "at the house of Mr John Cawood, in Leeds".<sup>99</sup> His conversion to Owenism appears to have been total and instant,<sup>100</sup> and he even named one of his sons after Owen.<sup>101</sup> However, perhaps reflecting its owner's views, *The Intelligencer* took a broadly encouraging line to Owen's plan without fully committing itself to the cause. Owen's *Report to the Committee of the Association for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor* was printed in full over several editions in 1817 with an introductory paragraph which said that it deserved serious consideration:

Though we are not yet prepared to give a decided opinion on the merits and practicability of a scheme so comprehensive in its object, so stupendous in operation and effect, it is but justice to avow, that, hitherto, no defect in its structure, no sufficient obstacle to its execution, has occurred to us. It seems, at least on a hasty examination, to be as simple as it is great, as skilful as it is beneficent, as practicable as it is original and grand.<sup>102</sup>

With or without *The Intelligencer's* public endorsement of Owen's ideas, this was the cause to which Mudie would devote himself for much of his life.

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<sup>99</sup> G. Mudie, *Letter to R. Owen*, 25 August 1848.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Robert Owen Mudie – see Appendix.

<sup>102</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 14 April 1817.



## Mr Owen's Plan

*The poor ... should be made national.*<sup>103</sup>

The life and ideas of Robert Owen have been extensively researched, but in order to clarify Mudie's contribution, a brief summary is necessary. Owen, the god-father of co-operation, was a self-made man, a capitalist and highly successful cotton mill owner. He was also a philanthropist who had, by almost universal consent, a saintly temperament. He "radiated" "goodwill to all mankind" with "unaffected sincerity",<sup>104</sup> his demeanour was "calm and serene".<sup>105</sup> He was "a man of almost sublimely child-like simplicity of character and at the same time one of the few born leaders of men".<sup>106</sup> The down side of the saintliness was that he was so sure that his ideas were right that he displayed "exasperating tolerance towards those who differed from him".<sup>107</sup>

Owen's guiding principles were that character, by which he seems to have meant moral character, was the product of circumstance, not of nature, and that happiness, which was the object of human exertions, could not be obtained in an environment where health, knowledge and wealth were lacking. These ideas, which had also been expressed by earlier thinkers such as William Godwin, were directly opposed to the conventional wisdom that poverty was the result of moral deficiency.<sup>108</sup> Owen, to prove his point, spent much of his time and money improving the conditions of his workers: setting up a sickness benefit and pension scheme, providing infant education and reducing the working day without loss of pay. His mill at New Lanark, Scotland, achieved international acclaim as a model village whose inhabitants were both well-behaved and happy.

Between 1813 and 1816 Owen published four essays, collectively titled *A New View of Society: Essays on the Formation of Character*, which culminated in a plea for government action to improve the character of the poor,

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<sup>103</sup> R. Owen, *Report To the Committee of the Association for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor*, March 1817.

<sup>104</sup> F. Podmore, *Robert Owen, a Biography* (Hutchinson, 1906), p. 125.

<sup>105</sup> M. Beer, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>106</sup> F. Engels, *Anti-Duhring* (1878).

<sup>107</sup> F. Podmore, op. cit., p. 226.

<sup>108</sup> W. Godwin, *Enquiry concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793). See also Podmore, op. cit., pp. 108-125; R. A. Davis and F. O'Hagan, *Robert Owen* (Bloomsbury, 2010).

thus making them less criminally inclined and more useful to society. This was to include action against drinking and gambling (such as increased duties on spirits, withdrawal of gin-shop licences and abolition of the national lottery), but, above all, the setting up of “a national system for the training and education of the poor and lower orders”. Its purpose was to enable the poor to find employment, but in the event of there being no work available Owen recommended government-funded national works, such as road repairs, whose rates of pay would be set locally at less than the average wage paid by the private sector. However, it was never to fall “below the means of temperate existence”.<sup>109</sup>

In 1815 Owen started a campaign for improved working conditions in factories, lobbying MPs to introduce legislation banning the employment of children under the age of ten, limiting the working day to twelve hours, (six for children aged between ten and twelve) and ensuring that all children received a basic education before they could be employed. In his campaign pamphlet, *Observations on the Effects of the Manufacturing System*, he looked at capitalism in the light of his principles of character formation and did not like what he found. The better instincts of the capitalists had been sacrificed to the desire to accumulate wealth and the cutting of costs in the face of increased competition reduced the “lower orders” to

a situation infinitely more degraded and miserable than they were before the introduction of these manufactories, upon the success of which their bare subsistence now depends.<sup>110</sup>

Pecuniary gain was all that mattered and “all are sedulously trained to buy cheap and to sell dear”. In spite of Owen’s confidence that his fellow manufacturers would see the benefits of his proposals he failed to convince them. He had some support among MPs, and Sir Robert Peel piloted the Bill through Parliament.<sup>111</sup> But it took the best part of four years to do so and the Bill was so emasculated in the process that Owen washed his hands of it.

His self-confidence, however, remained undaunted and the deepening economic recession of 1816 led him to apply his thinking on a grander scale. He became involved with the Association for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor, which set up a committee, comprising the “great and good” and chaired by the archbishop of Canterbury, to consider

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<sup>109</sup> R. Owen, *A New View of Society: Essays on the Formation of Character* (1816).

<sup>110</sup> R. Owen, *Observations on the Effects of the Manufacturing System* (1815); *The Life of Robert Owen, written by himself* (1857).

<sup>111</sup> Peel was the father of the Robert Peel who became prime minister in 1834.

practical measures for assisting the poor. Owen told the committee that the cause of the present distress was the dramatic reduction of demand following the ending of the war with France and that machinery was now doing the jobs that human labour had done previously. He was asked to propose a remedy and spent the next six months writing his report.

He began by outlining the effects that mechanisation had had on the economy. It had decreased the price of manufactured goods, leading to greatly increased demand, which had in turn caused more human labour to be employed, stimulated further mechanic inventions and increased Britain's productive power "fifteen or twenty fold" over a period of twenty-five years. The war itself had stimulated demand but now that peace had returned, demand had dropped, sources of supply had contracted and the price of labour had plummeted, thus reducing the labourer's ability to buy the goods that were being manufactured.

Human labour, hitherto the great source of wealth in nations, being thus diminished in value at the rate of not less than from two to three millions sterling per week in Great Britain alone, that sum, or whatever more or less it may be, has consequently been withdrawn from the circulation of the country, and this has necessarily been the means by which the farmer, tradesman, manufacturer, and merchant, have been so greatly impoverished.<sup>112</sup>

He proposed the building of "establishments" to house between 500 and 1,500 people, with surrounding farmland of between 1,000 and 1,500 acres, and provided a detailed plan of the layout. The community would be self-sufficient: growing and milling its own corn, rearing and slaughtering its own meat, brewing its own beer, and manufacturing goods, although at this point Owen was not specific about what these would be. He estimated the cost for 1,200 people at £96,000, or £60,000 if the land was rented rather than purchased. The capital outlay represented £80 per person and at an annual interest of five per cent this was £4 per head, which Owen said was easily repayable as the labour of the individuals would increase the value of the land. Initial funding could come from consolidating the funds of public charities, borrowing from the Sinking Fund<sup>113</sup> or from private individuals, and from equalising the poor's rates. In other words "the poor, including those belonging to public charities, should be made national."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> R. Owen, *Report To the Committee of the Association for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor*, March 1817. This was the germ of a theory of under-consumption, see below, p.42.

<sup>113</sup> A fund in which budget surpluses were deposited and invested in order to reduce the national debt.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

Returning to the theme of his *New View of Society*, Owen had much to say about improving the character of the inhabitants of these establishments, who would be:

men, women, and children, of all ages, capacities, and dispositions; most of them very ignorant; many with bad and vicious habits, possessing only the ordinary bodily and mental faculties of human beings, and who require to be supported out of the funds appropriated to the maintenance of the poor - individuals who are at present not only useless and a direct burthen on the public, but whose moral influence is highly pernicious, since they are the medium by which ignorance and certain classes of vicious habits and crimes are fostered and perpetuated in society.<sup>115</sup>

Central to Owen's recommendations was the education of the children. Every child over the age of three would attend the establishment's school and sleep in its dormitories. As they grew older they would be "trained to assist in gardening and manufacturing for a portion of the day, according to their strength" and, above all:

no pains shall be spared to impress upon them such habits and dispositions as may be most conducive to their happiness through life, as well as render them useful and valuable members of the community to which they belong.<sup>116</sup>

Owen did not use the word "co-operation" and only touched on the subject of "community", but both of these are implicit in every aspect of his proposals. All labour would be "for the benefit of the establishment" and mechanisation would be encouraged "but only in aid of, and not in competition with, human labour". In fact, the whole purpose was to "unite men in the pursuit of common objects for their mutual benefit" and there was clearly no place for competitive individualism. His subsequent newspaper articles would make these points more explicitly, including his hope that, eventually, all property would be held in common.<sup>117</sup>

The concept of communal living was not new; self-governing, self-sufficient communities had sprung up on numerous occasions in the past and, usually, just as quickly faded away. Occasionally, these communities had been formed to pursue a political programme, such as the Diggers' attempt to take land into common ownership. More often than not, however, they were religious sects, either fleeing from persecution or withdrawing from the world to await the millennium. In Owen's plan, communal living would improve the economic and moral well-being of

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. Owen was not specific about the selection process.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> R. Owen, *A Further Development of the Plan*, 25 July 1817.

the participants, and as his thinking developed he began to envisage a network of similar communities in which large sections of the population would live. Communities of this kind would no longer be on the margins of society, but at its heart.

According to Owen, the archbishop of Canterbury's committee got cold feet when they read his report and referred it to the House of Commons Poor Law Committee, who then decided that they did not need to consider the report at all.<sup>118</sup> Owen then started his own campaign to bring his plan to public attention. He wrote lengthy letters to the press and organised two public meetings in the City of London Tavern. At first, the establishment was broadly supportive of, or at least interested in, Owen's ideas. The government made encouraging, if non-committal, noises and the press praised his character and gave him widespread coverage. "Mr Owen's Plan" became so well known that it was referred to as such for many years in the knowledge that everyone would know what it was.

Outright opposition came mainly from two groups. Radicals did not like the fact that Owen had many friends in high places; they did not like his lack of interest in parliamentary reform and regarded him as a stooge of the Tory government who would deny them their political rights; they did not like his paternalism and saw his proposed villages as little more than workhouses ("parallelograms of paupers" as Cobbett put it); and they did not agree with his analysis of the economic reasons for the depression, preferring to blame high taxation.<sup>119</sup>

The other group comprised the "political economists": David Ricardo, Robert Malthus, James Mill, Robert Torrens and others, who were the spokesmen of the capitalist middle class. Their ideas, based on Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), were that wealth was created by commerce between businessmen who were motivated entirely by self-interest and the desire to accumulate private property. They believed that the economy would be most successful if its regulation was left to the market. Their faith in market forces was bolstered by "Say's Law", the creation of the French economist Jean-Baptiste Say, which claimed that there was equilibrium between overall supply and demand and that over-production in one area would be balanced by unmet demand in another:

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<sup>118</sup> R. Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen, written by himself* (1857).

<sup>119</sup> "Let the Poor alone. The working bee can always find a hive"; *Black Dwarf* 20 August 1817.

"Mr. Owen conceives that all human beings are so many plants which require to be reset. He accordingly proceeds to dibble them in squares, etc". *Hone's Reformists' Register* 23 and 30 August 1817.

"Mr Owen ... will find that the lower classes are pretty well convinced that he is a tool to the land-owners and Ministers." Robert Wedderburn, *The Forlorn Hope*, 4 and 11 October 1817.

If certain goods remain unsold, it is because other goods are not produced.<sup>120</sup>

This was at the heart of laissez-faire economics, enabling its supporters to deny that the post-war depression stemmed from any failure in the capitalist system, and to oppose such government intervention as taxation (for example, the poor's rate), factory legislation (such as Peel's Bill to restrict working hours for children) and restrictions on free trade (particularly the Corn Laws).

Another of their core beliefs was Malthus's theory of population<sup>121</sup>, which claimed that population would increase far faster than the means to support it, until it was checked by war, starvation or disease. This profoundly pessimistic doctrine, the antithesis of Owen's vision of human happiness and plenty, was presented as if it was a natural law and therefore unarguable. Even though Malthus substantially revised his theory, to add virtuous self-restraint to his list of checks on population (and, in doing so, demolished his argument that a catastrophic rise in population was inevitable),<sup>122</sup> the simplicity and gloom of his original statement exerted considerable influence on nineteenth-century thinking about the poor, especially among those who were inclined to believe that the poor had only themselves to blame for their plight. Ricardo's theory of rent added an extra economic twist to Malthus's views. He argued that higher food demands from an increasing population led to cultivating less productive land, which increased costs and food prices. This in turn caused wages to rise and profits to fall, the only winners being the landowners, whose rents would increase: a situation which Ricardo called "the stationary state".<sup>123</sup>

Both groupings spoke against Owen at the two public meetings in August 1817. The first meeting ended in uproar after some radicals tried to amend Owen's resolution by attributing the cause of national distress to high taxation. One of their leaders, Henry Hunt, accused the chair (a Mr Rowcroft) of lying when he said that the amendment had been outvoted,

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<sup>120</sup> J-B, Say, *Traité d'économie politique* (1803).

<sup>121</sup> Anon., *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), revised and Malthus's authorship acknowledged 1803, 1807, 1807, 1817 and 1826.

<sup>122</sup> "If it be possible for a perfectly virtuous community to limit their numbers, they will perform that duty just as they perform all others; there is no infallible principle that will break up the village community; it can adjust its numbers to its food, and may last for ever. In its first form the *Essay on Population* was conclusive as an argument, only it was based on untrue facts; in its second form it was based on true facts, but it was inconclusive as an argument." Walter Bagehot, *Economic Studies* (1880).

<sup>123</sup> D. Ricardo, *Conversations on Political Economy* (1817).

at which Rowcroft invited Hunt outside to settle their differences!<sup>124</sup> At the second meeting, a week later, Owen alienated large sections of the establishment and other potential supporters by launching into a stinging attack on organised religion:

Then, my friends, I tell you, that hitherto you have been prevented from even knowing what happiness really is, solely in consequence of the errors – gross errors – that have been combined with the fundamental notions of every religion that has hitherto been taught to men. And, in consequence, they have made man the most inconsistent, and the most miserable being in existence. By the errors of these systems he has been made a weak, imbecile animal; a furious bigot and fanatic; or a miserable hypocrite; and should these qualities be carried, not only into the projected villages, but into Paradise itself, a Paradise would be no longer found!<sup>125</sup>

In *A New View of Society* Owen had criticised the religious intolerance that he had encountered at New Lanark, but his views had not caused much adverse comment. However, such a direct linkage between his plan and an all-out attack on religion was hardly conducive to influencing public opinion on the plight of the poor. For Owen though, his plan was no longer simply about the poor. In a long letter to the press he said that he had been entirely satisfied with the outcome of the meeting, dismissed his opponents as “ill-trained and uninformed” and announced that the purpose of his campaign was “to ameliorate the condition of mankind”.<sup>126</sup> He identified four classes of society to which his proposed “Villages of Unity and Mutual co-operation” were now to be made available – paupers, working classes without property, skilled working classes and tradesmen with a little property and property holders of independent means. However, there was to be no intermingling between classes, each village being restricted to “those only who have been trained in the same class, sectarian notions, and party feelings”. He then listed 140 different combinations of religious sect and political party (each split between their “violent” and “moderate” wings) which anyone could volunteer to join. When there were 500 signatures for any grouping the plans for its establishment as a village would commence. In the final part of the letter Owen's language became increasingly millennial as he delivered a quasi-religious sermon:

Yes, on this day, the most glorious the world has seen, the RELIGION OF CHARITY, UNCONNECTED WITH FAITH, is established for ever. *Mental*

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<sup>124</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 18 August 1817.

<sup>125</sup> R. Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen, written by himself*, Vol. 1a, pp. 115, 116.

<sup>126</sup> R. Owen, *A further Development of the Plan for the Relief of the Poor, and the Emancipation of Mankind*, 6 September 1817.



## The Hidden Oak

*liberty for man is secured; and hereafter he will become a reasonable, and consequently a superior being.*

THUS, IN THE FULNESS OF TIME, ERE ITS COMMENCEMENT WAS WELL KNOWN, IS THE GREAT WORK ACCOMPLISHED.

THE CHANGE HAS COME UPON THE WORLD LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT!

NO MAN KNOWS WHENCE IT COMETH, NOR WHITHER IT GOETH!<sup>127</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the government did not commit any public money to giving Owen's plan a trial, and his campaign faltered. He still retained some friends in high places and in 1819 another attempt was made to gather support for the plan. A committee was set up by the Duke of Kent to appeal for public subscriptions to raise £100,000 in order to fund a trial village of co-operation. Additionally, there was to be a debate in the House of Commons about setting up another committee to consider his plan. In its public statements the committee downplayed Owen's comments on religion, saying that whatever his private views, he had made no attempt to prevent his New Lanark workforce from practising their religion, that "his own house was a house of daily prayer" and that

his character is distinguished by active benevolence, perfect sincerity, and undisturbed tranquillity of temper.<sup>128</sup>

At this point, the political economists re-entered the fray. Robert Torrens wrote a long, detailed and strongly worded attack on Owen's plan, which appeared in *The Edinburgh Review*. Using Smith, Ricardo, Malthus and Say's Law as his starting points, he challenged Owen to prove how his proposed villages would be economically viable:

It is an ascertained and fundamental principle in political economy, that each additional portion of capital applied to heighten the cultivation of the soil, yields a less proportional return. Now, it is necessary for Mr Owen to demonstrate to us, that his villages, with their system of instruction and moral training, are calculated to alter this essential property of the soil, and to enable him to employ upon each of his farms of 1,000 acres, additional

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., Owen's upper-case letters.

<sup>128</sup> *Address of the Committee, under the Presidency of the Duke of Kent, to investigate and report upon Mr. Owen's Plan*, 23 August 1819.



portions of capital, with an undiminishing ratio of return.<sup>129</sup>

He said that uneconomic tilling of inferior soil, “barbarous restrictions upon commerce” and high taxation were the “three several causes combining to suspend prosperity” and, conveniently ignoring the destitution of the poor, he claimed that “there is nothing appalling in our situation, except the want of wisdom in our Rulers”. He patronisingly dismissed Owen as “an amiable, but mistaken enthusiast, who, had he the means of executing his plans, would aggravate the evils he dreams he could remove” and lambasted his ignorance of a subject which had been “rendered familiar to every school girl by an admirable little book, entitled, *Conversations on Political Economy*”.<sup>130</sup>

The article was influential, as *The Edinburgh Review* was a respected repository of political economy. Two months later, in the Commons debate, Owen was attacked both for his religious views and his economic ignorance. The chancellor of the exchequer, while praising Owen's character, dismissed the plan as “not only visionary and impracticable, but in the highest degree dangerous to the country”. Ricardo, who had recently become an MP, said that even though he was “completely at war with the system of Mr. Owen” he was in favour of setting up a committee to consider the plan, as one aspect of it, spade husbandry,<sup>131</sup> merited serious consideration.<sup>132</sup> But a more pointed comment came from Lord Althorp:

All were agreed that the plan proposed was absurd; where, then, was the necessity for appointing a committee to prove its absurdity?<sup>133</sup>

The motion was heavily defeated, and, in another setback, the Duke of Kent's committee was wound up at the end of the year after failing to

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<sup>129</sup> *The Edinburgh Review*, October 1819, Art. XI. 1. *A New View of Society, or, Essays on the Formation of Human Character, preparatory to the Development of a Plan for ameliorating the Condition of Mankind*. 2. *Observations on the Effects of the Manufacturing System*. 3. *Two Memorials on Behalf of the Working Classes, presented to the Governments of America and Europe*. 4. *Three Tracts, – and an Account of Public Proceedings relative to the Employment of the Poor*. By ROBERT OWEN. The authorship was anonymous but Podmore (op. cit., p. 266) states that it is an expanded version of a speech given by Torrens in July 1819. Ricardo, in a letter to J. R. McCulloch, states that Torrens was the author (D. Ricardo, *Letters*, No 355, 28 February 1820).

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> An experiment by Mr William Falla of Gateshead had convinced Owen that crop yields could be increased if the soil was dug by spade rather than plough. See R. Owen, *Report to the County of Lanark*, 1 May 1820.

<sup>132</sup> *Hansard, HC Deb. 16 December 1819, Vol. 41, cc. 1189-217. Motion Respecting Mr. Owen's Plan*.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

raise anything like sufficient funds to set up a village.

The objections of the political economists constituted a major obstacle to the credibility of Owen's plan, especially if he wanted to attract investment, either from government or private individuals. None of their arguments were new: Torrens had been Owen's most vocal challenger at the various public meetings going back to 1817, and Malthus had specifically targeted him in the latest revision of his *Theory of Population* (1817), the same year in which the *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* established Ricardo as the leading economist of his time. Owen had had plenty of time to refute them, yet he had not done so, and when Torrens publicly asked him whether the produce of the proposed villages was for own consumption or for sale his reply, that it could be either, suggested that he might not have fully thought through the issue.<sup>134</sup>

A major problem for Owen and other dissenters from capitalist economic orthodoxy was that the political economists had virtually cornered the market in economic theory, and there were few published texts which could be quoted to refute them. Their science, they claimed, was based on fundamental laws that proved how wealth was created and, although there was scope for disagreement within the fundamental principles,<sup>135</sup> anyone who challenged the principles themselves was just ignorant.

One dissenting voice was that of Charles Hall, who constructed his critique around the definition of the word *wealth*. Adam Smith, Hall stated, had failed to define the key word in the title of his magnum opus, and wealth had come to mean the possession of generally valuable things. Hall argued that this was a poor definition, as different people might attribute high or low value to the same possession, so he substituted his own:

Wealth, therefore, is the possession of that which gives power over, and commands, the labour of man: it is, therefore, power.<sup>136</sup>

Hall said that wealth gave an advantage to its possessor in precisely the same proportion as it disadvantaged its non-possessor. Therefore, the claim by political economists that a man selling his labour to a capitalist represented an equal exchange was untrue:

There is no voluntary compact equally advantageous on both sides, but an absolute compulsion on the part of the masters, and an absolute necessity on the part of the workmen to accept of it; and which, therefore, might be con-

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<sup>134</sup> *The Times*, 27 July 1819.

<sup>135</sup> Malthus, in particular, was regarded as a loose cannon because he supported the Corn Laws.

<sup>136</sup> C. Hall, *The Effects of Civilisation of the People of European States* (1805), p. 39.

sidered just as the taking so much from the workman by the master: and, of course, fortunes amassed in this manner cannot be just.<sup>137</sup>

Using a mixture of government statistics and independent estimates, Hall calculated that the eighty per cent of the population who actually created the wealth only received one-eighth of it, while the other twenty per cent pocketed the other seven-eighths. He thus provided a stepping-stone towards an alternative economic theory, as well as ammunition for raising class consciousness. However, his solutions, which included the abolition of primogeniture and the transfer of labour from manufacturing back to the land, were of more interest to the radicals than to the Owenites.<sup>138</sup>

The political economists could get away with patronising Owen as an ignorant amateur, and ignoring Hall altogether, but the Swiss historian and economist, Jean Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, proved a tougher nut to crack. In a rigorous challenge to Say's Law, Sismondi argued that the capitalists' desire to maximise profits, cut-throat competition and the introduction of new machinery had combined to reduce wages to the point where workers could no longer afford to buy the goods that were being produced. The goods remained unsold, so the capitalists stopped manufacturing them and laid off the workforce. This, he said, was not a minor blip but a full-blown crisis, which would take a long time to resolve. This theory of under-consumption became a key element of anti-capitalist economics: the capitalists overproduced and the labourers under-consumed.

The earnings of an entrepreneur sometimes represent nothing but the spoliation of the workmen. A profit is made not because the industry produces much more than it costs, but because it fails to give to the workman sufficient compensation for his toil. Such an industry is a social evil.<sup>139</sup>

Owen had anticipated some of Sismondi's ideas and the two men appear to have arrived at their positions independently.<sup>140</sup> They met during Owen's grand tour of Europe in 1818, but all Owen wrote about their conversation

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>138</sup> Hall partly influenced Thomas Spence, who corresponded with him. Mudie dismissed Hall's work out of hand in *The Economist*, No. 4 (17 February 1821), but later he modified his position - see below, Chapter 6.

<sup>139</sup> Sismondi, *Les Nouveaux Principes d'Economie Politique* (1819). Unlike Owen, however, Sismondi argued that competition could be beneficial if it led to increased production in response to increasing demand.

<sup>140</sup> See above, p. 37. The under-consumption theory was widely known by 1817, when it was used in a letter to the home secretary from Leicester framework knitters. See E. P. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

was that it was so interesting that he was late for dinner.<sup>141</sup> The political economists were certainly concerned enough about the publication of Sismondi's book for Torrens to refer to it in *The Edinburgh Review's* attack on Owen. Sismondi responded in kind and their war of words continued well into the 1820s.<sup>142</sup>

For Owen and his supporters, however, the most useful text was by Patrick Colquhoun. Colquhoun fully supported the ideas of the political economists and made no apology for the fact that the wealth of the nation was built upon the backs of the poor:

Without a large proportion of poverty there could be no riches, since riches are the offspring of labour, while labour can result only from a state of poverty.<sup>143</sup>

In calculating the wealth of the nation, however, he tabulated extensive statistics, taken from official sources, to show how much wealth each section of society possessed, generated and spent. These tables showed, more scientifically than Hall's calculations, the wide disparity between what people contributed to the well-being of society and what they got out of it, and provided the raw material for anti-capitalist economists to launch a counter-attack.

Owen made use of Colquhoun's tables in his speeches, constructing metal pyramids to illustrate how much weight the bottom strata of society had to bear. But issues such as productive power, over-production, under-consumption, value of labour and Malthus's population theory were only briefly touched on, with little attempt to explain his views in detail; Owen appeared satisfied just to state that his plan was "in complete unison with the soundest principles of political economy".<sup>144</sup> Opinion as to why this should be so has been widely divided. A few have made the case for Owen as a legitimate economic thinker,<sup>145</sup> while some have argued that Owen's understanding of social mechanisms and economic theory was too superficial for him to realise that the criticisms of the political economists were of more than academic interest. Others have suggested that he saw political economy as part of a much bigger picture; he regarded the true purpose of politics as being to improve the physical, moral and intellectual character

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<sup>141</sup> *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself* (1857), Vol. 1, p. 173.

<sup>142</sup> A superb account of Sismondi's battles with Ricardo and co. is given in Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), although one has to constantly substitute the name Torrens for McCulloch, as Red Rosa thought that the latter had written the *Edinburgh Review* article.

<sup>143</sup> Patrick Colquhoun, *Resources of the British Empire* (1814), p. 110.

<sup>144</sup> R. Owen, *Address delivered at the City of London Tavern* 21 August 1817. See also *The Life of Robert Owen, written by himself*, Appendices relating to letters and speeches of 1816 – 1819.

<sup>145</sup> For example, G. Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium* (Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 34-66.

of man, and, therefore, the creation of wealth was not a goal in itself, but simply a means to an end.<sup>146</sup>

If there is doubt as to the level of Owen's economic understanding, critics and supporters alike noted his lack of interest in debating with anyone who opposed his ideas:

He ... persists in asserting that his plan is the wisest, best and most admirable scheme that ever entered into any human comprehension. It is – because it is.<sup>147</sup>

He should not have been satisfied with presenting truths of so great weight and magnitude (as those are which he has promulgated) before the public, without employing every art of persuasion to induce attention to them.<sup>148</sup>

This tendency was so marked that E.P. Thompson's conclusion that "Owen simply had a vacant place in his mind where most men have political responses"<sup>149</sup> may be apposite.

Fortunately, however, some of his allies were prepared to take up the cudgels on his behalf. Claeys cites as early examples John Bone, whose periodical *The Age of Civilization* appeared from 1816 to 1818, and Joseph Weston, one of the main contributors to *The Mirror of Truth*, which Owen had set up in 1817.<sup>150</sup> Here were first articulated the link between the wealth of a nation and its productive and intelligent members, and the importance of seeing Owen's plan in economic terms – themes that Mudie would later develop.

In an attempt to use economic arguments to counter Owen's critics, a pamphlet, *Mr Owen's Proposed Arrangements for the Distressed Working Classes, Shown to be Consistent with Sound Principles of Political Economy: in Three Letters addressed to David Ricardo, Esq. MP*, was published in November 1819<sup>151</sup>. According to Beer, it was probably written by Mudie at Owen's behest, but Claeys is more circumspect, saying that

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<sup>146</sup> F. Podmore, op. cit., p 265; V. A. C. Gattrell, *Introduction to Robert Owen: New View of Society and Report to the County of Lanark* (Pelican, 1970); Beatrice Webb, *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain* (1910), p 20, both quoted in S. Pollard, *Robert Owen as an Economist*, Address to the Robert Owen Bi-centenary Summer School 1971: *Robert Owen and his Reference to Our Times* (Co-operative College Papers).

<sup>147</sup> *Black Dwarf*, 20 August 1817.

<sup>148</sup> *The Economist*, No. 12 (14 April 1821).

<sup>149</sup> E. P. Thompson, op. cit., p 861.

<sup>150</sup> G. Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium*, pp. 68-70. Owen announced the commencement of *The Mirror of Truth* in September 1817 but only two editions are known to have been published.

<sup>151</sup> Advertisement in *The Morning Chronicle*, 19 November 1819.

without further evidence the authorship is uncertain.<sup>152</sup> Although there is no hard evidence of Mudie's hand, there are strong similarities, both in content and, particularly, in style, between *Mr Owen's Proposed Arrangements*, the *Vindication of Mr Owen's Plan*, which appeared the following year, and Mudie's journal, *The Economist* (1821-1822), which suggest, to this writer at least, a common authorship.<sup>153</sup>

The pamphlet started by powerfully stating the seriousness of the present situation:

Never was there a period at which the country was more saturated with wealth of every description; - but this wealth, or rather the comforts produced by wealth, not being sufficiently diffused amongst the lower orders renders the whole precarious.<sup>154</sup>

The writer reiterated, that the root cause was the "excess of production beyond the means of consumption",<sup>155</sup> which had occurred as a result of machinery replacing human labour.

The idea that cutting taxes would solve the problem was dismissed as a drop in the ocean:

The truth is, that consumption would not be materially increased by such remission; as every soldier, sailor, and tax gatherer, is as much a consumer as those from whom the taxes are now raised; their being productive or non-productive consumers has little to do with the present question ...<sup>156</sup>

What was needed, he said, was a plan,

which proposes the employment of idle capital, at legal interest, to enable the unemployed poor to support themselves; so that whatever number of workmen the use of mechanism may deprive of employment, may be taken up by establishments created by this capital; that the poor may no longer place their ultimate dependence on the cold hand of parochial charity.<sup>157</sup>

The author praised both Owen's "extensive knowledge of political economy" and "the profoundness, intrepidity, yet unaffected simplicity which combine in Adam Smith", whose "enlightened principles" were "a correct standard, by which the value of political opinions might be justly

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<sup>152</sup> M. Beer, op. cit., p. 169. G. Claeys, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>153</sup> For comments on Mudie's writing style see below, Chapter 6.

<sup>154</sup> Anon., *Mr Owen's Proposed Arrangements*, p 17.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

appreciated".<sup>158</sup> However, to those who had invoked Smith's doctrine of *laissez-faire* he responded that "Apathy and inactivity were not to be found in Adam Smith's catalogue of political virtues"<sup>159</sup> and that had he foreseen the seriousness of the present situation he could never have recommended that no action be taken.

In the writer's attempt to locate Owen within mainstream political economy even Malthus's population theory was treated with respect. Malthus's opinions, he said,

have been greatly misunderstood by the careless and unreflecting part of the community ... the whole tendency of his work is to repress famine, crime, and misery, which are in fact as effectually repressed by increasing the means of subsistence as by diminishing our existing population.<sup>160</sup>

Nor did he think that Malthus would disagree with the recent claim by the agriculturalist Thomas Coke, that Britain had the means to support three times the present population.

The pamphlet's only scorn was reserved for "the prejudice and illiberality which have marked the conduct of some of the political economists of the present day, whenever they have deigned to notice Mr. Owen's plans". Such people only looked at society

through the medium of a favourite system: out of this enchanted circle they can discover neither truth nor utility; and it is well known that the influence of a favourite system over the mind is neither slight nor transient.<sup>161</sup>

The author claimed that Owen's proposed communities would be economically viable. Bulk purchase of seed and raw materials for clothing would create considerable savings in the cost of means of subsistence, which would in turn reduce labour costs for any manufactured articles intended for sale. Maintenance costs such as cooking would also be much lower under communal living than for the same number of families living separately. He gave no figures to back up his assertions but listed the types of cost involved in growing corn and baking bread communally (seed, taxes, rent, labour); showing the extra costs involved if the process took place outside the community (carriage plus profits for the farmer, corn factor, miller and baker).

In what appears to be a departure from its original purpose of defending Owen's plan on economic grounds, the rest of the pamphlet was devoted

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 23.



to lengthy accounts of the philanthropic work of Count de Rumford in Munich, Owen at New Lanark (taken from *A New View of Society*) and Elizabeth Fry at Newgate Prison. This was intended to counter the widespread view that the poor were morally incapable of improving their habits and the writer strongly hinted that the decision to include these sections was made by someone else:

I could not at first acquiesce in the propriety of introducing such lengthened extracts into the following letter, but I am now, Sir, much mistaken, if, on their perusal, you will not thank me for substituting these interesting narratives, for any reasonings which I could advance upon the subject.<sup>162</sup>

If Ricardo was grateful to read “these interesting narratives” he kept it to himself. In his frequent correspondence with other political economists of the time, *Mr Owen’s Proposed Arrangements* was not mentioned at all and, from Ricardo’s endorsement of Torrens’s *Edinburgh Review* essay, it is probable that the pamphlet fell on stony ground.<sup>163</sup>

This was not the only Owenite pamphlet to appear in 1819. One, by “Philanthropos”<sup>164</sup>, began with economic arguments similar to *Mr Owen’s Proposed Arrangements* before concentrating on the themes of morality and education, while another, by “A Lover of Truth”, briefly dismissed Torrens’s article as reflecting the individualistic principles of Adam Smith.<sup>165</sup> The following year, in his *Report to the County of Lanark*, Owen reiterated his previously expressed under-consumption theory to explain the extent of the national crisis and flatly contradicted Malthus by claiming that the country possessed unlimited potential for increasing productive power and therefore wealth and increased population. He also confronted head-on Adam Smith’s belief in self-interest:

if there be one closet doctrine more contrary to truth than another, it is the notion that individual interest, as that term is now understood, is a more

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 33. It seems unlikely that Mudie would have allowed anyone other than Owen to overrule him.

<sup>163</sup> *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo, Vol. 8 Letters 1819-June 1821*. No. 355 Ricardo to McCulloch, 28 February 1820.

<sup>164</sup> *Remarks on the Practicability of Mr. Robert Owen’s Plan to Improve the Condition of the Lower Classes*, by “Philanthropos” (London, 1819). “Philanthropos” was the pen name of John Minter Morgan, who, as a committed Christian, was an important advocate of Owen’s ideas on morality – see J. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 25-28.

<sup>165</sup> *Observations on the Critique contained in The Edinburgh Review for October 1819 of Mr Owen’s Plans for Relieving the National Distress*, by a Lover of Truth. (Edinburgh, 1819).



advantageous principle on which to found the social system, for the benefit of all, or of any, than the principle of union and mutual co-operation.<sup>166</sup>

To this Owen added a new ingredient: the standard of value. Gold and silver, he said, were an arbitrary standard and their replacement by bank notes simply proved that paper could represent any value at all. He stated that “manual labour, properly directed, was the source of all wealth”<sup>167</sup> and that the standard of exchange value had to be changed to reflect this. Although transactions outside the communities would have to take place within “the legal circulating medium”,<sup>168</sup> within and between the proposed villages paper bank notes would be replaced by notes showing the value of an item in terms of the amount of labour that went into making it. In this way:

exchange of the products of labour may proceed without check or limit, until wealth shall become so abundant that any further increase to it will be considered useless, and will not be desired.<sup>169</sup>

To the objections of Torrens and others that the villages would never be profitable, Owen countered by saying that spade culture would achieve the increased crop yields demonstrated by Mr William Falla. He compared the methodologies of cultivating land by spade and plough and argued that the spade created better subsoil and allowed water to penetrate to the optimum depth for successful crop growth. This he linked to his overall economic strategy by arguing that the labour intensiveness of spade culture would provide employment for an expanding population over many generations. He also answered Torrens's question about whether the communities would be entirely self-sufficient or whether they needed to trade with the outside world, saying that some surplus produce would be exchanged for other surplus products from other villages, some would be stored for future consumption and some sold in order to generate legal tender to pay taxes.

There is much more besides and, typically, Owen was long on rhetoric, short on factual evidence to support his arguments and prone to occasional flights of fancy.<sup>170</sup> The *Lanark Report*, however, is a key document in the

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<sup>166</sup> R. Owen, *Report to the County of Lanark*, 1 May 1820, p. 25.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11. This was to be the basis of the exchange bazaar system of the 1830s – see below, Chapter 8.

<sup>170</sup> Over a page, for example, is devoted to the style of clothing that the children should wear; something “resembling the Roman and Highland garb” for the boys and “a well-chosen dress” for the girls. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Owenite canon, providing as comprehensive an account of his economic thought as he would ever give, as well as an alternative social strategy to that of the prevailing orthodoxy.<sup>171</sup>

Two months later another pamphlet, *A Vindication of Mr Owen's Plan for the Relief of the Distressed Working Classes in reply to the Misconceptions of a Writer in No 64 of The Edinburgh Review*, provided a full rebuttal of the charges made in Torrens's article.<sup>172</sup> Its printer and publisher were the same as those of *Mr Owen's Proposed Arrangements*, which the pamphlet made reference to, leading Claeys to suggest that both works "may well have been by the same author".<sup>173</sup> Stylistically, it has Mudie's fingerprints all over it.

The *Vindication* commenced in the same way as the earlier publication, by praising the "justly acquired reputation" of *The Edinburgh Review* and saying that its criticism only arises from conviction that the present distress could be greatly alleviated. The author expressed his complete faith in Owen's plan but acknowledged, perhaps prompted by the lack of detail shown by Owen in support of his assertions, that "most of the arguments now produced in favour of these arrangements admit of considerable amplification".<sup>174</sup>

He was less polite, however, towards Torrens, saying that had he shown more diligence, impartiality and humanity he would surely have produced something more worthwhile than "an attempt to put down by ridicule, a most disinterested and spirited effort to mitigate the sufferings of the working classes." As he had done in *Mr Owen's Proposed Arrangements*, he praised Adam Smith, while warning that we should not "invest him with the robes of infallibility", but he was merciless towards Smith's disciples:

The incorrect opinions which the reviewer has formed respecting Mr Owen's plan, are exactly those which a mere theoretic economist is likely to entertain, after a careless and superficial examination of the subject. It would appear that gentlemen of this class having once imbibed the opinions of Adam

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<sup>171</sup> A succinct overview of Owen's economic ideas is his *Address to the agriculturists, mechanics, and manufacturers, both masters and operatives, of Great Britain and Ireland* (7 September 1827).

<sup>172</sup> *The Monthly Magazine, or, British Register*, Vol. 50, list of new publications in July 1820.

<sup>173</sup> G. Claeys, op. cit., p. 71. For comments on Mudie's writing style see below, Chapter 6.

<sup>174</sup> Anon., *A Vindication of Mr Owen's Plan for the Relief of the Distressed Working Classes in reply to the Misconceptions of a Writer in No 64 of The Edinburgh Review* (London, 1820), Advertisement.

Smith, are utterly incapable of considering any topic connected with political economy but through the medium of his doctrines.<sup>175</sup>

The author backed up his assertions with a forensic dissection of Torrens's essay. In an authoritative tone, quite unlike that of Owen but identical to the one later used by Mudie in *The Economist*, he exhorted his readers to pay close attention to the detail of the arguments:

The objections and misconceptions of this gentleman may be referred to two heads. 1st, Those which arise from a supposition that the proposed establishments will not yield an adequate rate of profit to pay their expenses, including interest of capital and taxes. 2nd, Objections arising from the supposed national loss which would accrue were these establishments to become general. As the first position is of vital importance, and indeed appears to include the last, we must solicit the reader's close attention to the following observations; dismissing from his thoughts all the ephemeral theories of political economy.<sup>176</sup>

He added a touch of class-consciousness to Owen's theory that labour is the source of all wealth, losing Owen's qualification, "properly directed", in the process:

Is not the labour of the poor the mine from which are drawn the millions which contribute to the comfort and luxury of civilized society? It would appear that the labour of the poor is not only sufficient to support themselves, but also to supply the natural and artificial wants of millions besides.<sup>177</sup>

In order to show the considerable scope for domestic savings to be made by living communally, he demonstrated an awareness of the economic reality of being at the bottom of the chain of distribution and first-hand knowledge of how the poor actually lived:

It is no less unfortunate than true, that those parts of our population which are the least able to support it, are in reality charged with the heaviest load of profit.<sup>178</sup>

If, indeed, the pamphlet was written by Mudie, its author's comment on fuel wastage could have been based on memories of being brought up in an Auld Reekie tenement:

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

We do not speak at random when we assert that one chaldron of coals will go as far as ten, as at present consumed in the garrets and cellars of the poor.<sup>179</sup>

Torrens had made much of Owen's original ambiguity about the self-sufficiency of his villages and had claimed that, if they were to be so, they would be too small to achieve any benefits from the division of labour, a cornerstone of political economy. Every villager would have to carry out a multitude of tasks and would waste much time in the process, thus making the villages uneconomic. The author of the *Vindication* pointed out, with relish, the false premises on which that argument was based:

There are two little mistakes in our Reviewer's statement above, which must not be passed over, as on these two fallacies the plausibility of his argument turns. The first is, Mr Owen never proposed that the villagers should consume the entire produce of their own labours; had he so recommended, he might indeed have justified the Reviewer in the use of certain epithets which he is pleased to bestow upon Mr Owen. The second mistake arises from not knowing that the villagers are to be confined to one occupation (exclusive of the use of the spade), instead of following the multiplicity mentioned in the above extract.<sup>180</sup>

Giving Torrens a taste of his own medicine, he ridiculed him for not fully understanding Ricardo's law of diminishing returns:

The Reviewer has somewhere read, "that the ration of profit on capital, devoted to the culture of any given plot of land, diminishes in proportion to the amount of capital;" and the observation is correct to a considerable extent; but to admit it as an indisputable axiom or uniform general principle, we hold to be quite erroneous ...<sup>181</sup>

He also criticised him for accusing Owen of being anti-machinery, when Owen had in fact made several public statements to the contrary:

It is therefore most heedless in the Reviewer (to use the mildest expression) thus to hazard assertions so utterly unfounded. This want of accurate observation caused him to mistake Mr Owen's opinion of the chief cause of our present excess of human labour, for an opposition to the use of machinery; ...<sup>182</sup>

And in a final riposte the author reminded Torrens of the gap between Adam Smith and his followers; recommending that he re-read Sismondi's

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 34. Torrens had said of the under-consumption theory, "we hold [it] to be fundamentally erroneous".

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

*Les Nouveaux Principes d'Economie Politique,*

as no one appears to have studied our admirable Smith with more industry, or with more perfect freedom from the trammels of theory.<sup>183</sup>

*Mr Owen's Proposed Arrangements* and *A Vindication of Mr Owen's Plan* are good examples of early Owenite writing. If, as the evidence suggests, they were written by Mudie, they show him to be fully committed to Owen's ideas and increasingly confident of his own ability to construct his arguments around economic principles: a self-confidence which would be further demonstrated by his next Owenite publication, *The Economist*.

When Mudie arrived in London in the middle of 1820, Owen's plan was a long way from becoming realised. Owen himself was still on friendly terms with "the great and good" but, in spite of his writings and those of his allies, there were few signs that funding for a trial community would be forthcoming, even from within the County of Lanark, to whose officers Owen had addressed his *Report*. There was, however, an altogether different audience, as yet untapped, who might be receptive to Owen's ideas, and it was to this constituency that Mudie next devoted his energies.

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 47. It should be noted that Sismondi's work was only available in its original French.

## Spa Fields

*We are as certain as we are of our existence,  
that this may be done, if we know but our own  
strength, and be true to ourselves.*<sup>184</sup>

The year 1821 marked the true beginning of the British co-operative movement. This was the year in which Robert Owen's plan was translated into action by the founding of the first co-operative society and the opening of the movement's first co-operative store. The fledgling organisation's first chronicle, *The Economist*, was founded that year, while the following year saw the first Owenite community established at Spa Fields. The main driving force behind all these activities was George Mudie, and he achieved this while holding down a day job as editor of a London daily newspaper.

Following the debacle in Leeds, Mudie arrived in London in the summer of 1820. By this time he was sufficiently well versed in the principles of Owenism to deliver, apparently with Owen's blessing, a series of lectures on the plan. The original idea was to take the lecture tour around the country. Mudie even wrote to the home secretary, Lord Sidmouth, offering to provide "a faithful representation of the general state of political feeling, particularly among the labouring classes, toward His Majesty's Government". Mudie's offer was based on a desire to be "in some degree serviceable to my country", but he made it clear that he would not be naming any disaffected individuals. Sidmouth, whose spies had infiltrated all parts of the radical movement, politely declined the offer.<sup>185</sup> The nationwide tour did not, however, materialise and Mudie confined his lectures to London. He also landed a good job as editor of a well-established London daily newspaper, *The Sun*.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> R. Hunt, J. Shallard, J. Jones, G. Hinde, R. Dean, H. Hetherington, *Report of the Committee appointed at a meeting of Journeymen, chiefly Printers, to take into consideration certain propositions, submitted to them by Mr. George Mudie, having for their object a system of social arrangement, calculated to effect essential improvements in the condition of the working classes, and of society at large* (London, 13 January 1821).

<sup>185</sup> G. Mudie, Letter to Lord Sidmouth, 19 July 1820.

<sup>186</sup> M. Beer, op. cit., citing Francis Place, says that Mudie got a job on *The Morning Chronicle*, thanks to the influence of James Mill. This is incorrect; it was Robert Mudie, not George, who worked for *The Morning Chronicle*; see R. Mudie's obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1842, p. 214.

Mudie's lectures commenced in August 1820 and were advertised in the *Morning Post*:

MR OWEN'S PLAN – On Thursday evening next, at seven o'clock, will be delivered, at Mitchell's Assembly Rooms, south west corner of Lincoln's Inn Fields (Portsmouth Street), the FIRST of a SERIES of FOUR EXPLANATORY DISSERTATIONS on the PLAN of Mr OWEN, of New Lanark, for placing the Labouring Classes in a situation of Abundance, Comfort and Happiness, and for ameliorating the Condition of Society at large. With an Introductory Exposition of the true causes of the present severe distress, and of the decline and downfall of Nations; and illustrated by Ground Plans and Models, representing one of Mr Owen's proposed Villages of unity and mutual co-operation. By G MUDIE.<sup>187</sup>

Admission was one shilling and the proceeds from the lectures, which had been sanctioned by Owen himself, would go into a fund "for the formation of one of his Establishments provided there shall be a reasonable prospect of the practical introduction of the System previous to January 1822". Ladies were welcome and ministers of religion were "earnestly invited to co-operate in extending the knowledge of the principles of this system, as being the most certain and efficacious means, under the Divine blessing, of reducing the precepts of Christianity to practice amongst all mankind".

In its editorial column the *Morning Post* gave the proposed lecture its blessing:

A more God-like object it were impossible for human understanding or ability to pursue; and we hope and trust that the laudable exertions of this worthy Gentleman will be duly appreciated by every humane and benevolent mind, and meet that encouragement and success to which they are so eminently and so justly entitled.<sup>188</sup>

and, the following week, another London paper gave Mudie's lecture a glowing review:

He showed with much force of language and of argument ... the cause of the present distress, and ... that Mr Owen's plan was not only capable of instantly removing that distress, but of preventing its recurrence in future ... We shall more particularly notice Mr Mudie's succeeding Lecture.<sup>189</sup>

Mudie's lectures appear to have been aimed predominantly at a middle class audience; anyone interested in funding a community was expected

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<sup>187</sup> *The Morning Post*, 7 August 1820.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> *The Examiner*, 13 August 1820.

to be able to invest £100.<sup>190</sup> The specific invitation to the clergy showed an awareness of the need for bridge building after Owen's denunciations of religion. The most enthusiastic response, however, was from the artisan working class. A group from Mudie's own trade, journeymen<sup>191</sup> printers, attended the meeting and, in spite of some initial reservations, became interested in the possibility of setting up their own co-operative community. They attended all Mudie's lectures, held numerous meetings with him and by the beginning of the following year had published their findings. The *Report of the Journeymen Printers* is the earliest known example of Owen's "plan" being put into practice.<sup>192</sup>

The printers had not been converted by Owen's speeches and publications; they admitted to having had "strong prejudices" against the proposed system and doubts as to its practicability.<sup>193</sup> Mudie patiently overcame these by giving them a history lesson in which he showed "that, to the co-operation of man with man, society owes every advance which it has made from the most barbarous state, to the present stage of civilization".<sup>194</sup> As a result of his efforts they became convinced that only by acting co-operatively would they improve their quality of life, both materially and intellectually, provide a better education for their children and avoid "being ingulphed [sic] in that vortex of pauperism which the decreasing demand for human labour is daily enlarging".<sup>195</sup>

In an important departure from Owen's blueprint, however, they made it clear that they did not want to depend on the philanthropy of others in order to improve the quality of their lives; their community was to be built on the principle of working-class collective self-help and they were confident that they could do it by themselves. A tension between the top-down, philanthropic and bottom-up, self-help approaches would be apparent throughout the early history of the co-operative movement.

Let us remember, that the working classes are the creators of wealth; and let us see whether, instead of wasting our energies in unprofitable or degrading

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<sup>190</sup> *The Morning Post*, 7 August 1820.

<sup>191</sup> Craftsmen who had passed through their apprenticeship and were qualified to work for others, but who had not yet achieved "master" status and so could not employ anyone.

<sup>192</sup> R. Hunt & c, op. cit. For accounts of the *Report of the Journeymen Printers*, the Co-operative and Economical Society and its community at Spa Fields see Robert Southey, *Colloquies on Society*, Vol. 1 (1829), R. G. Garnett, *Co-operation and the Owenite socialist communities in Britain, 1825-45* (Manchester University Press 1972), F. Podmore, op. cit., M. Beer op. cit., and W. H. G. Armytage op. cit. Also, above, Introduction.

<sup>193</sup> R. Hunt & c, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.



pursuits, it may not be practicable, by arrangements perfectly lawful, and entirely within our own competency, to create new wealth for ourselves, and so to manage our affairs, even in the infancy of our associations, as to procure a larger quantity of the means of subsistence for the same money, and to enable our wives to perform their domestic duties more skilfully, in half the time which those duties at present occupy. We are as certain as we are of our existence, that this may be done, if we know but our own strength, and be true to ourselves.<sup>196</sup>

Building upon the claims that Mudie had made in *Mr Owen's Proposed Arrangements* about the economic advantages of bulk purchasing, the report provided a table of the costs that would be incurred by the community in order to feed and clothe itself, compared with the same purchases made by individual families from retail outlets. Assuming a community of 250 families, totalling 1,000 people, this would produce a saving of £7,780 per year.<sup>197</sup> Further savings, as yet unquantified, would be made if the community was able to rent some land for growing vegetables and keeping poultry, to which end they would be looking to set up their community on the edge of the city.<sup>198</sup>

The report also stated that additional economic advantages would accrue by the women taking a communal approach to domestic duties, such as cooking, cleaning and washing clothes, applying Adam Smith's principle that labour is shortened and simplified in proportion as it is divided and subdivided. This would produce a considerable saving of time, which would enable some women to be released from those duties in order to assist with the education and supervision of the children or to undertake paid work for the benefit of the community.<sup>199</sup> Further economies of scale could be achieved by utilising new technology, such as a steam-cleaning press, which Mudie calculated would save the daily labour of fifteen to twenty women in a community of 1,000 to 1,500.<sup>200</sup>

In later years, under the influence of William Thompson's *Appeal of One Half the Human Race* (1825), Owenites came to see themselves as champions of equal rights for women, although some writers have ques-

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 17. This included rent, bread, shoes, fuel, meat, beer, tea, sugar, clothing, fish, salt, soap, puddings and dairy produce. The community intended to bake its own bread, brew its own beer and to provide butchers, cobblers and clothes makers from within its own ranks.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 8; also, *The Economist* No. 51 (2 March 1822).

<sup>200</sup> *The Economist*, No. 8 (17 March 1821).

tioned how far they actually put this into practice.<sup>201</sup> Neither Mudie nor the writers of the report made any reference to gender equality and cannot be regarded as proto-feminists.<sup>202</sup> They did, however, acknowledge the “domestic toil and drudgery by which [women] are now oppressed”; recognised the value that women brought to the community through housework and childcare and tried to create the conditions under which their economic contribution could be increased.

Irrespective of the economic benefits of communal living, the aspect of the plan that most excited the journeymen was the inclusion of a school. Education was a key tenet of Owenism and to illustrate its importance Mudie devoted a whole issue of *The Economist* to sing the praises of Owen’s own educational establishment at New Lanark and that of Philipp Emanuel von Fellenberg of Hofwyl, Switzerland, who had set up a school of industry for the poor (as well as seminaries for children from other socio-economic classes). Both men believed that the character of children would improve if they were treated with kindness rather than brutality. Furthermore, children should be taught from an early age to engender happiness in others:

the principle which has been impressed upon the child in the play-ground, – that he must endeavour to make his companions happy, – is renewed and enforced on his entrance into the school; and one of the duties of the school-master is to continue the training of his pupils to the practice of always acting upon this principle.<sup>203</sup>

All children between three and six years old would attend the infant school, where they would be taught

to read well, and to understand what they read, – to write expeditiously a good legible hand, – and to learn correctly, so that they may comprehend and use with facility, the fundamental rules of arithmetic. The girls are also taught to sew, cut out, and make up useful family garments; and after acquiring a sufficient knowledge of these, they are to attend in rotation in the public kitchen

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<sup>201</sup> For example, Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (Virago Press, 1983); Carol A. Kolmerten, *Women in Utopia: The Ideology of Gender in the American Owenite Communities* (Syracuse University Press, 1998).

<sup>202</sup> “The Females of the Establishment will not be worn down by over-exertion, nor by the distraction of conflicting duties; it is therefore to be presumed that they will be better companions, and better fitted to participate with their husbands in such innocent recreations as will be attainable”(!) R. Hunt & c, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>203</sup> *The Economist*, No. 9 (24 March 1821), quoting a speech by Owen

and eating-rooms, to learn to prepare food in a wholesome and economical manner; and to keep apartments neat and well arranged.<sup>204</sup>

From seven to twelve years of age, school would continue, but children would gradually be introduced to the concept of work by being employed for one hour a day for the first year, rising by one hour per day each year until the maximum of six hours was reached in their twelfth year. Mudie criticised Fellenberg for teaching children to accept their lowly status, but he also realised the risks to a child's education that Owen's system of "work-release" might bring; and, going beyond the ideas of both Owen and Fellenberg, showed himself to be an early advocate of the concept of lifelong learning:

Mr. Fellenberg avowedly restricts the extent and quality of the instruction to be given to the pupils, in his School of Industry, to such branches of education only as are necessary for them as husbandmen, and as shall induce them to prefer the condition of labourers in which they are to be placed, rather than aspire to higher stations in society; and, though the institution at New Lanark is not deformed by this contracted principle, – yet the practical results are nearly similar; for as the children must at an early age necessarily go to some employment, either in the works, or into the world, their education from that period must proceed less regularly, or be entirely interrupted.

Under the arrangements, on the other hand, of the new societies, the regular acquisition of knowledge, and progress in intelligence, will go on, without interruption, for many years; and may be continued, with increasing advantage, throughout the whole life of the individual.<sup>205</sup>

Mudie also wanted the school to have a sufficient number of teachers to ensure a rotation of fresh supervisors every three hours, an idea that the journeymen printers fully approved of. As parents, they had experience of the stresses caused by

those harsher feelings which are but too frequently excited by the exuberant spirits of youth when pent up in incommodious dwellings, where exertion is mostly productive of annoyance or mischief, and where the parents are too frequently soured by care and excessive exertion.<sup>206</sup>

They regarded Mudie's proposed educational system as "the steam-engine of the moral world" and joyfully looked forward to a better future for the next generation:

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> R. Hunt & c, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

We shall have the happiness of seeing our children well educated and trained, and of enjoying constant opportunities of caressing them, and shall have the consolation of knowing, that should they be deprived by death of parental care, they will remain under the watchful eye of friends who will never see them want, but still “train them in the way they should go”.<sup>207</sup>

It needs to be stressed just how radical some of these ideas were. The last thing that the establishment wanted was for working-class people to get ideas above their station, so the very concept of mass literacy was threatening. Working-class children, in its eyes, should be taught to read and write, but not to reason, or to question the authority of those placed above them in the social order. Fellenberg was progressive, Owen more so, but their educational systems, in Mudie’s view

fall far short of the perfection which is proposed to be introduced into the system of the villages of Unity and Co-operation.<sup>208</sup>

The journeymen printers were not wide-eyed utopians and were all too aware of the potential pitfalls of communal living. They knew that some discord would be inevitable when people of different opinions, dispositions and habits were brought together but they intended to create the conditions under which it would be kept to a minimum. Admission was to be open to all, without any religious or political test or insistence on “conforming to the arbitrary will of the founder”;<sup>209</sup> the only condition being that each applicant formally recognised the maxim “that whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others, he has a right to do for himself; and that it is his duty to do as much as he can, without injury to himself, for the benefit and comfort of the Society”.<sup>210</sup> Each family would have its own private space to withdraw to, there would be no restrictions on receiving visitors or making trips out and no-one would be forced to remain in the community against their will. Every adult would have a vote in elections for the managers of the community and disputes would be referred to independent arbitrators, whose decision would be final.

Perhaps prompted by Mudie’s history with the Edinburgh Forum, or

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>208</sup> *The Economist*, No. 9 (24 March 1821). See also Harold Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education* (Routledge, 1965) and Robert A Davis and Frank O’ Hagan, *Robert Owen* (Bloomsbury, 2010). For a summary of early nineteenth-century conservative opposition to working-class education see A. E. Dobbs, *Education and Social Movements, 1700-1850* (London, 1919), pp. 145-151.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid

possibly because of the journeymen's experience of benefit clubs and trade associations, there were to be stringent safeguards against mal-administration of funds. Payments were to take place in the presence of witnesses, regular checks were to be made on cashiers and no one involved in managing the finances, either at storekeeper or committee member level, would be allowed to remain in the same post for too long.

The issue which caused the most debate, however, was Owen's belief that all property held within a community should be communally owned, irrespective of the contribution made by each individual. The artisans, who would have undergone long apprenticeships in order to attain their journeyman status, were not prepared to share the fruits of their own industry and skill with those who contributed less:

This indeed is an objection which, we confess, pressed very heavily upon our own minds, and which was not removed until after repeated discussion. The love of independence and the tenacity with which we grasp the fruits of our industry or skill, have hitherto been predominant features in the British character; and we judge from our own feelings, that any proposition which appears to require the sacrifice of those feelings, is not very likely to be listened to with patience.<sup>211</sup>

Community of property was a thorny subject for Owenites and would later cause deep divisions within the community at Orbiston.<sup>212</sup> The report's pragmatic solution was that their community would be run along the lines of an army or navy mess: each person would contribute the same sum towards general expenses, to be set at the level that the least wealthy contributor could afford; but individuals could pay in more in order to have extra items and were entitled to keep any articles that they brought with them when they joined. Full community of goods would only take place by unanimous consent of the members.

Before recapitulating the advantages of the plan, the journeymen issued a powerful call to arms to would-be co-operators:

Let us at last break down the impediments which have hitherto kept men from assisting themselves and each other. Let those who can make one article be so situated, that they can exchange with persons who can make others. Let the linen, cotton, woollen, and silk weavers interchange with each other, and with the cutler, the upholsterer, the hosier, the hatter, the tanner, the printer, the builder, farmer, teacher, &c. and it will soon be found that there is no want of a market for them all; — that all have great wants which require to be supplied; and, which is of the most importance, that they possess the power of

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<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>212</sup> See below, Chapter 7.

abundantly supplying every deficiency of which they now complain. Let us but be placed together in dwellings which are contiguous, and with the command of a small portion of the soil, for which we will pay the usual rental, and we shall soon shew our Legislators what we are capable of doing for ourselves, for our children, for our landlords, for our employers, for our country, and for our fellow-creatures.<sup>213</sup>

They realised that the initial funding of their proposed community would have to come from outside sources and they proposed to raise £12,000 in £100 shares, the buildings remaining the property of the shareholders and the community paying a rental of seven and a half per cent per annum. However, they also showed great confidence in the power of collective action and encouraged other working-class organisations, such as friendly societies, to consider whether they could benefit from adopting individual parts of the plan.

At the end of the report they announced the commencement of a new weekly periodical, *The Economist*, which would discuss and develop the principles contained in the report. They also circulated copies of the report to their fellow printers and asked them to attend a meeting to discuss it. That meeting took place on 22 January 1821 at Mitchell's Assembly Rooms, The Strand, where the journeymen decided to adopt the report and to form a society, to be called the Co-operative and Economical Society, with the aim of putting Mudie's plan into action, and the committee was tasked to draw up regulations for its governance. The first co-operative society had now been formed.<sup>214</sup>

*The Economist* chronicled the activities of the Co-operative and Economical Society from its inception until March 1822.<sup>215</sup> Progress towards setting up a community was slower than hoped. In May 1821 Mudie announced that the society was about to commence the wholesale purchase of provisions and other items, but felt the need to reassure readers that this was not due to any concern that they would never be able to procure the buildings required for the proposed community, "but for the purpose of obtaining, in the mean time, all such advantages derivable from co-operation as are at present within their reach."<sup>216</sup>

The article went on to say that, in order to fund the initial purchases of provisions, each member had to purchase at least one five shilling share.

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<sup>213</sup> R. Hunt & c, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>214</sup> *The Economist*, No. 1 (27 January 1821). The journeymen clearly regarded the plan as Mudie's rather than Owen's and referred to it as such throughout their *Report*.

<sup>215</sup> For an account of the economic and other subject matter of *The Economist* see below, Chapter 6.

<sup>216</sup> *The Economist*, No. 15 (5 May 1821).

The treasurer would review the finances each quarter and if there were more funds than were strictly needed a portion of the shares would be repaid with interest. Premises for storage were to be obtained and a store-keeper employed. In order to pay the expenses and to provide an accumulating fund the goods were to be sold at five per cent above prime cost. In order to facilitate distribution, members were encouraged, if circumstances permitted, to live near to each other and to prepare for communal living by considering ways of co-operatively looking after their dwellings and supervising their children.<sup>217</sup>

The store, however, took some time to organise and in mid-June, in a letter to *The Economist*, some society members took Mudie to task for the slow progress. They had discovered that four working-class people, unconnected with the society, had combined to purchase a whole lamb at Smithfield and were less than pleased that the society had not managed to do something similar since its inception:

we did feel considerable mortification at being so much outrun in time by four untaught *clodhoppers*, who have not had the benefit of any previous training.<sup>218</sup>

Mudie's response indicates that funding was still a problem. Owen's plan had again been debated unsuccessfully in Parliament, but Mudie hoped that the publicity generated by the debate would lead to an influx of capital. He asked his readers for a few more weeks, after which "whether the required aid be obtained or not, I pledge myself that something shall be done".<sup>219</sup>

The exact date of the store's opening is not known but by September Mudie was reporting that it was up and running, producing savings of nearly thirty per cent on articles already purchased. The accumulating fund, however, was still very limited and Mudie asked members to purchase more shares and to provide information on the best markets for the society's purchases.<sup>220</sup> The members responded by voting to make weekly contributions to the fund, while making it clear that subsequent members would not be bound by this and that there would be "no distinction, either as to rank or other, advantages, between the subscribing and the non-subscribing Members".<sup>221</sup>

Although the idea of pooling finances to buy goods at wholesale prices

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Letter from "A few co-operative economists", *The Economist*, No. 22 (23 June 1821).

<sup>219</sup> *The Economist*, No. 23 (30 June 1821).

<sup>220</sup> *The Economist*, No. 32 (1 September 1821).

<sup>221</sup> *The Economist*, No. 39 (20 October 1821).

was not new, this is its first recorded instance within the framework of what would become the co-operative movement. The co-operative store would eventually define the movement itself, but for Mudie and other early co-operators it was a means to an end: its purpose being to accumulate capital in order to buy or rent land for a community, and the store's profits were set aside for that purpose. Twenty years later, as the communitarian ideal began to fade, co-operative societies would abandon the idea of an accumulating fund and return the profits to their members in the form of a dividend.

The constitution and regulations of the society were also published in that issue. Its ultimate aim was to form a community in line with Owen's plan, combining agriculture, manufacturing and trade, but in the short term it wanted to acquire enough buildings to enable members to enjoy at least some of the benefits of co-operation while remaining in their current modes of employment. Productive employment was to be found for members who were without work, and provision was to be made for sickness and old age. Following the tenets of the *Report of the Journeymen Printers*, there would be no religious or political barriers to membership, in fact political discussion was to be banned, and the society's guiding principle, amended from the original wording, was to be

That in proportion as every member shall endeavour to promote the good of the whole Society, will be the amount of comfort and happiness enjoyed by each individual. <sup>222</sup>

The regulations concerned themselves mainly with financial responsibilities, for both individual members and the society as a whole. A pragmatic approach was taken towards individual conduct:

Good actions imply good principles. Whatever may, on experience, be found to produce an injurious effect, must be promptly rectified. It is therefore inexpedient to multiply rules of conduct beforehand. <sup>223</sup>

Events then moved quickly; in *The Economist* of 27 October Mudie reported that the committee were considering three possible sites for the community; on 3 November he stated that the decision had been made and on 17 November came the announcement that the first co-operative community had been set up:

The Co-operative and Economical Society has taken several houses, on very advantageous terms, in Spa Fields, – the rents to commence at Christmas next. Two or three of the families will however move into their residence in a

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.



## Spa Fields

few days. One of the houses has a large room, capable of containing upwards of a hundred persons, in which the Committee Meetings will be held in future. In this room, also, the congregational families will dine at one table.<sup>224</sup>

A small park and playground behind Exmouth Market, Finsbury, is all that is now left of Spa Fields, but in Mudie's time it consisted of a triangle of mainly open fields, either side of the River Fleet and bounded by what are now Kings Cross Road, Pentonville Road and Rosebery Avenue. The Society's houses were situated on the southern tip of the area, at the junction of Guildford Street East and Bagnigge Wells Road, now Attneave Street and Farringdon Road respectively. Coldbath Fields Prison was just across the road and Bagnigge Wells, where fashionable society had once "taken the waters", was a quarter of a mile to the north. The area was being encroached by new housing and by 1821 it was going downhill. In 1815 it had become legal to discharge household waste into rivers, which killed off Bagnigge Wells as a spa resort and turned the regular flooding to which the River Fleet was prone into a serious health hazard.<sup>225</sup>

Whatever the possible health risks, the Spa Fields community members were delighted with their new surroundings and Mudie gives a moving example of their happiness:

Several of the families (including the children,) have also for the first time assembled together in the large room, where they drank tea, and spent an evening in an agreeable and useful manner. I cannot better convey an idea of the appearance, spirit, and behaviour of this family congregation, than by repeating a remark made by one of the female Members, who said to me, that when she looked round the room, and saw the comfortable and happy scene which it presented, and observed the cordiality and mutual good will of the whole of the party, and thought of the occasion and character of the meeting, it was frequently with difficulty that she refrained from bursting into tears of joy and thankfulness. May God bless those who gave birth to such emotions; and bless the emotions which were excited.<sup>226</sup>

The same issue announced the rental and living costs that each family had to pay. Rooms cost from two to four shillings per week and weekly expenses were on a sliding scale from one pound two shillings and sixpence to fourteen shillings and six pence, depending on the size of each family.

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<sup>224</sup> *The Economist*, No. 43 (17 November 1821). The community would eventually comprise 22 families

<sup>225</sup> Pigot & Co. *Metropolitan Guide & Miniature Plan of London* c1820. For a history and artists' impressions of Bagnigge Wells see the posting by Jondoe on <http://www.sub-urban.com/lost-bagnigge>. Also, W. Thornbury, *Old and New London* (1878), [www.british-history.ac.uk](http://www.british-history.ac.uk)

<sup>226</sup> *The Economist*, No. 45 (1 December 1821).

The children would sleep in general dormitories and be under constant supervision. If any child was employed by the community for more than six hours per day its parents did not have to pay for its bed and board. The precise nature of the children's employment is not clear, but they probably helped their parents in providing the services that the society was now in a position to advertise:

The society can now execute orders in carving and gilding, and for boots, shoes, gentlemen's clothes, dress-making and millinery, umbrellas, hardware, (including stoves, kettles, &c.) cutlery, transparent landscape window-blinds, and provisions. All the articles will be furnished of the best qualities, according to prices which will uniformly be moderate.<sup>227</sup>

One of the first acts of the community was to address the education and supervision of their children. They advertised for a full-time female teacher and contacted Mrs Elizabeth Fry, whose educational work in Newgate Prison had been widely reported in Owenite publications, for help with the selection process. Pending the appointment, two women from the community would supervise the children between six in the morning and eight at night, ensuring that at no time would they be left unattended.<sup>228</sup>

They also took steps to minimise the risks of discord between families by setting up a thoughtful and innovative system of dispute resolution. Each community member would have a "monitor", whose job was "privately and delicately, but frankly, and as frequently as in his judgment might be proper, to notice to his appointer such errors of conduct, temper, or language, as he might from time to time observe, and particularly to admonish him of any faults in his behaviour toward all or any of his co-associates".<sup>229</sup> Any complaints against individuals were to be directed to the monitor, who would discuss them with the person complained against without revealing the name of the complainant. The monitor had power to reject a complaint if he considered it to be frivolous or insufficient and his decisions were binding on all the involved parties. To ensure trust in the system, members would appoint their own monitors but they had to change them every three months.

The community also arranged for a medical practitioner to make regular visits and laid plans for a medical laboratory. Mudie announced his intention of using medical and other information to chronicle the progress of the community:

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> *The Economist*, No. 50 (19 January 1822).

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

From his Reports, and those of the various Committees, I shall be enabled to lay before the public sets of tables, accurately representing the condition and progress of a community, as respects the births, marriages, and deaths, the ascertained or probable causes of disease and death in the individuals of both sexes, and the age at which dissolution takes place; the sexes of the children and their physical condition at the birth; the mode of treatment pursued: as to their food, clothing, exercise, rest, &c, in health and sickness; the development of their mental and bodily powers, and the means pursued for the formation of good and prevention of bad-habits of mind and body, and with what success; the general monthly state of the whole Society, as respects its health, morals, industry, recreations, acquirements, wealth, comforts, and good agreement or otherwise; &c. &c.<sup>230</sup>

Such a chronicle would have been a valuable historical document, but, unfortunately, it has not survived, or perhaps was never written. *The Economist* itself was soon to sink without trace and the production of its final issues was rather chaotic. As well as editing *The Sun* and *The Economist*, Mudie had been the latter's printer since September 1821, but in issue No. 50 he apologised that this and the previous edition had been late going to print and that "similar circumstances, and the want of good management, have rendered the printing of *The Economist* lately exceedingly inaccurate". The next edition did not appear until March and Mudie commented that recent issues "have abounded with so many blunders, that I am quite ashamed of them".<sup>231</sup> It seems clear that Mudie was having to devote far more time than he could really afford to the running of the Spa Fields community and something had to give. He delegated the printing duties to others within the community but it was not enough. *The Economist* No. 52 appeared on 9 March 1822 and, although references were made to the next edition, this was to be its last. It contained a fund-raising appeal, intended for circulation amongst the "Nobility and Gentry", in which Mudie invited orders for the wide range of services that the community could now provide. To the list published three months earlier they had added drawing, joining and cabinet making, bookselling, bookbinding, and stationery (but not printing!); an indication that their skills base was being expanded by new members. The letter ended with a statement of the independence of the community, but perhaps also a hint of its vulnerability:

The Society has been formed by the spontaneous junction of the Members, without the influence of patronage and authority, or the aid of advances of

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<sup>230</sup> *The Economist*, No. 51 (2 March 1822).

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.* Why printing should have been so problematic in a community set up by a group of journeymen printers remains a mystery!

capital. These are advantages, however, of the value of which the Members are fully sensible; and which they confidently hope will be obtained for them by the correctness of their views and the propriety of their conduct.<sup>232</sup>

Little is known about the history of the Spa Fields community after the demise of *The Economist*. According to Mudie, it lasted for about two years,<sup>233</sup> which dates its dissolution around the end of 1823. The few details that are available include a visit from Owen himself, who attended the Co-operative and Economical Society's anniversary dinner at Guildford Street East in April 1822:

The dinner was furnished in a style of elegant economy, and consisted of good substantial fare. After dinner, Mr Owen read his principles upon which the institution was founded, gave an account of the advantages and progress of the Society, and enlarged upon those evils which it was intended to remove, and those blessings it was calculated to diffuse. The Chairman and Mr Jones spoke in a very able manner, and elicited much and deserved applause.<sup>234</sup>

The community was still in existence in January 1823, although Mudie candidly admitted to Owen that they felt “totally abandoned”.<sup>235</sup> Later that month, however, he commenced publication of another journal, *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*, in which he presented a more upbeat picture of life at Spa Fields. By now, the Society had changed its name to New Society No. 1 and Mudie hoped that other co-operative societies would take the same name with a different number in order that they might quickly recognise each other. Although the men still carried out their own trades individually, the women took a collective approach to domestic duties. They were planning to expand the community in London and to adopt “measures for enabling the Society to kill its own butcher's meat ... and to grind its own wheat.” Above all, the community school was flourishing, with lessons in reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, book-keeping, geography, elements of astronomy, principles of human society, history, elocution, music, dancing, French, natural and moral philosophy, Latin, drawing in water colours, on velvet or in oils, and designing. Adult evening classes were planned and there were to be regular lectures on political economy, given by “a gentleman who has

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<sup>232</sup> *The Economist*, No. 52 (9 March 1822).

<sup>233</sup> G. Mudie, Letters to Robert Owen, 25 and 29 August 1848.

<sup>234</sup> *The Morning Post*, 27 April 1822. The Chairman would surely have been Mudie and Mr Jones was probably Benjamin Scott Jones, who, as “Philadelphus”, was a regular contributor to *The Economist*; see below, Chapter 6

<sup>235</sup> G. Mudie, Letter to Robert Owen, 3 January 1823.

long been engaged in the investigation of that important science”.<sup>236</sup>

According to Mudie, his own and twenty-one other families at Spa Fields lived together “in perfect harmony”,<sup>237</sup> so perhaps their monitorial system did its job. He actually left the community before the end, having been forced by the owners of *The Sun* to choose between the two, and he attributed the downfall of the community to a lack of co-operators with sufficient influence and zeal to carry on.<sup>238</sup> He also accused Owen of decrying the community out of jealousy.<sup>239</sup> These may well have been contributory factors, but, considering that Mudie’s original calculations had assumed a community of 250 families, the fact that it was set up with less than one tenth of that number must surely have severely limited its resources, both human and financial. The account given by the poet Robert Southey, seems nearer the mark:

The capital was not forthcoming. The experiment was commenced with insufficient means, and under circumstances every way inconvenient. Of necessity therefore it failed; and then the failure was imputed to the impracticability of the scheme, whereas, had it been fairly set in action, it could hardly have failed to work well.<sup>240</sup>

The importance of Spa Fields tends to be downplayed in the histories of the Owenite communities: Harrison hardly mentions it at all, Garnett and Beer see it as simply a prelude to the larger experiment at Orbiston, while Armytage, in something of a non-sequitur, says that “the community was to be no Owenite village, nor a spade paradise, but located in the city itself”.<sup>241</sup> Owen distanced himself from it, as he was to do from most of the other projects carried out in his name, and, as there is no evidence that its intention to grow its own crops ever materialised, it was probably only a halfway house in terms of Owen’s plan. However, the Co-operative and Economical Society was the first of its kind and the history of the co-operative movement can be traced back to its activities.

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<sup>236</sup> *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*, No. 3 (8 February 1823), p. 65.

<sup>237</sup> G. Mudie, Letter to Robert Owen, 25 August 1848.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> G. Mudie, Letter to Robert Owen, 29 August 1848.

<sup>240</sup> R. Southey, *Sir Thomas More, or Colloquies on Society* Vol. 1 (1829), p.139. Southey was a friend of Owen and keen supporter of co-operation. In their *Report* the journeymen printers had included some lines from his *Ode, Written in December 1814* which, they said, “deserve to be written in diamonds”.

<sup>241</sup> J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969); M. Beer, *op cit*; R. G. Garnett, *op cit*; W. H. G. Armytage, *op. cit.*

## M. The Economist

*The unprincipled and unrelenting  
despotism of capital.*<sup>242</sup>

*The Economist* is Mudie's best-known publication and, alongside his founding of the Spa Fields community, is the reason he is mentioned in books about co-operative history. Its value as a primary source is immense: as well as chronicling the Spa Fields project it became a focal point for the fledgling co-operative movement around the country, with letters announcing the formation of local societies and discussing the practical and theoretical problems of popularising Owen's plan. Owen himself was seldom in the public eye during 1821, spending most of his time attending to his New Lanark mill and, in the wake of his *Report to the County of Lanark*, raising funds to set up a community near Motherwell.<sup>243</sup> Throughout the fifteen months of its existence *The Economist* was the main public voice of Owenism.

The first issue appeared on 27 January 1821 and every Saturday thereafter, price three pence. Its Prospectus said that it was "to be devoted to the Development of Principles calculated immediately to banish Poverty from Society, and to the Discussion of all Questions connected with the Amelioration of the Condition of Mankind",<sup>244</sup> and its front page contained a Latin motto from the playwright Terence, "Homo sum – Humani nihil a me alienum puto".<sup>245</sup> Each issue commenced with an untitled editorial, always signed "M. The Economist".<sup>246</sup> The subjects covered included the causes of poverty, the replacement of communal activity by individualism, England's productive power, the effects of mechanisation, detailed descriptions of Owen's villages of community and their running costs, education, the formation of character, the principles of human happiness, Owen's relationship with religion, the effect of co-operative societies on the

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<sup>242</sup> *The Economist*, No. 36 (29 September 1821).

<sup>243</sup> See below, Chapter 7.

<sup>244</sup> *The Morning Post* 19 January 1821. When a bound volume of *The Economist* appeared later that year, this was changed to "explanatory of the New System of Society projected by Robert Owen, Esq.; and of a Plan of Association for improving the condition of the Working Classes during their continuance at their present employment".

<sup>245</sup> "I am a human being – I consider nothing that is human alien to me." Terence lived in the 2nd century BC.

<sup>246</sup> "M." would always appear on the left side of the page, and "The Economist" on the right.

retail trade, community of goods, spade husbandry, exchangeable value and the nature of capital. There were also readers' letters and progress reports from the Co-operative and Economical Society and the Spa Fields community, but no items of news or advertisements.

Mudie was determined to state Owen's plan in economic terms.<sup>247</sup> He confronted the widespread belief that poverty was unavoidable, even necessary. He examined the causes of poverty and immediately linked the alleged character defects of the poor to their economic situation:

Poverty is not, after all, the best nursery of Virtue; and that the speediest and most certain way to improve the moral character of men, is first to remove the sources of discomfort.<sup>248</sup>

He attributed the cause of poverty to a fundamental error in the framework of society. Although man's natural instincts were communal, individualism had triumphed, and a person's interests were seen as being directly opposed to those of other individuals, as well as of society as a whole. Consequently, the nation's enormous powers of production were used for the benefit of individuals and not for the whole people. Producers of essential items limited production to meet the demands of only those who could afford to buy, ignoring those who could not:

the productive powers of society are never brought into full and healthful operation; – but that, on the contrary, production, particularly of really useful and necessary articles, is ever kept within the bounds of consumption; or rather of what ought to be consumed, if all men were, as they are entitled to be, in a situation of comfort.<sup>249</sup>

The under-consumption theory was the cornerstone of Mudie's economic case, a "master truth" of which he urged his readers not to lose sight. It was the cause of poverty, which would only be cured when production was turned on its head:

Poverty must continue while production is confined within the bounds of consumption. Poverty, on the other hand, must be destroyed when production is carried beyond consumption.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> "It is by Political Economy that your system must triumph." G. Mudie, Letter to R. Owen, 3 January 1823. The most detailed analysis of Mudie's economic thought is in G. Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium* (Princeton University Press, 1987), but see also Noel W. Thompson, *The People's Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1984). M. Beer, op. cit., provides a summary of the content of *The Economist*.

<sup>248</sup> *The Economist*, No. 1 (27 January 1821).

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> *The Economist*, No. 2 (3 February 1821).



To make his point he cited a recent claim by the prime minister, Lord Liverpool, that the current distress was due to an excess of production:

His Lordship evidently confounds *sale* with *consumption*. He mistakes the influence and operation of profitable or unprofitable *demand*, for the influence and operation of the real *wants of the people*. The apparent or supposed *excess* does not arise from *consumption* having been *satisfied*; – from there being *something left*, after the necessities of the people have been *abundantly supplied*: It arises from consumption being *restrained* – from great numbers of the people being *prevented*, by circumstances over which they have no controul, [sic] from obtaining an abundance of agricultural produce for the *satisfaction* of their *wants*.<sup>251</sup>

He saw the prevailing economic policies as leading to a downward spiral of poverty:

The produce (already less than ought to be consumed) becoming continually less and less than the consumption, every succeeding period will have seen the people “*worse supplied, and the prosperity and population of the country will be evidently on the decline*.” – on the decline indeed, when hundreds of thousands of English families will have been consigned to premature graves, if not by absolute and direct starvation, at any rate by the diseases and misery engendered by scanty and unwholesome food, and all the variety of wretchedness.<sup>252</sup>

Reiterating one of Owen’s main themes, Mudie outlined the enormous growth in productive power resulting from the introduction of machinery into manufacturing processes and argued that under a “well regulated frame of society” the benefits of this would be available to all. Under the existing system, however, machinery competed against human labour and, instead of benefiting society, actually harmed it:

But, it is not less true, that, when the powers of machinery enter into competition with human labour, – wealth – not luxurious indulgences – but subsistence; – when machinery, in consequence of the form of society, does not assist manual labour as a means of increasing the wealth of the labourers, but supersedes it – and, so far from adding to the means of subsistence and to the comforts and leisure of the labourers, directly deprives them of their employments, and of the small share of comforts which, previously to the application of the machinery to their employments, they enjoyed – it is not less true, that, in such a case, whatever may be the natural tendency of invention, and however true may be the abstract principle on which the unlimited use of

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<sup>251</sup> *The Economist*, No. 3 (10 February 1821)

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid*.



## M. The Economist

machinery is encouraged, the practical effects are immediately and directly injurious to the displaced labourers, and of course ultimately hurtful to the best interests of the society at large.<sup>253</sup>

This introduced a critique of Malthus, who had stated that the introduction of new machinery tended to open markets, but, as machinery facilitated supply rather than demand, its wealth-creating benefits would be lost without an increase in consumption. In making this statement, said Mudie, Malthus had acknowledged that the inherent benefit of new machinery was not a self-evident truth, but contingent on other factors; a point with which Mudie fully agreed. However, he said, Malthus had also contradicted himself and confused theory with practice:

Now, if it were “known,” as Mr. Malthus asserts, “that facilities of production have the strongest tendency to *open markets*,” it would not be true, as Mr. Malthus also asserts, that they only “tend to facilitate *supply* without reference to *demand*”. The fact is, that the former assertion of Mr. Malthus is theoretically true, and, as he himself acknowledges, practically false; while the latter assertion, on the other hand, is theoretically false, and practically true.<sup>254</sup>

He also noted ruefully that while great skill was required to set up a manufacturing business or large farm, the nation’s operations were left almost entirely to chance. Venturing on to ground unexplored by Owen, Mudie said that a plan was needed, to ensure that

due attention is paid to the feeding of its whole people in the first place, to the clothing and lodging of them in the second, to the payment of their rents and taxes in the third, and to the furnishing them with superfluities and luxuries, from domestic and foreign commerce in the fourth, – instead of this rational and just order being entirely reversed, as is too generally the case under the present blind and absurd system of society.<sup>255</sup>

He realised that such a plan would be complex and suggested that the orthodox political economists had been unable to get to grips with the problem:

The affairs of a large community are necessarily so complicated and extensive, – there is so much counteraction and confusion, – that the people themselves naturally enough conclude it is impossible to introduce regularity and order, – the political economists, either erring from ignorance, or influenced

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<sup>253</sup> *The Economist*, No. 5 (24 February 1821).

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> *The Economist*, No. 6 (3 March 1821).

by despair, have always taken it for granted that the general welfare is best promoted by each individual attending only to his separate and individual interests;<sup>256</sup>

By now, it seems clear that Mudie's earlier attempt to present Owen's plan as being "consistent with the sound principles of political economy" had been superseded by a full-blooded attack on political economists, who, he argued, had completely misunderstood the relationship between capital and productive power:

Having seen that the productive powers of society are always put in motion (as society is now constituted) by capital, they have erroneously concluded that capital is the true and only power of production; and all their views, therefore, and all their ideas of advantage to society, have reference and are confined to the accumulation of capital.<sup>257</sup>

But the *source* of production, he said, was the land, and the only real *power* of production, beyond the spontaneous gifts of nature, was man's labour, which became infinitely more productive by combined rather than individual exertions. It was man's labour that produced and accumulated capital:

Capital, then, so far from being the power or source of production, is itself the product of labour, or rather of human co-operation. It did not precede, but follow, production. Production might go on without capital. Capital, on the other hand, has no power of multiplying itself. If the real power of production were suspended, capital, so far from increasing, could not preserve itself and would speedily be destroyed.<sup>258</sup>

Having laid the economic foundations, Mudie then extolled the advantages of Owen's proposed model villages: giving details of their layout, organisation, running costs, demonstrations of financial savings through collective purchasing and how the children would be raised and educated. He also provided lengthy descriptions (based on the *Letters to Ricardo* and Owen's earlier writings) of other institutions where philanthropists had improved the conditions of the poor. These included Fellenberg's school at Hofwyl, the work of Elizabeth Fry with female prisoners in Newgate, that of Count Rumford amongst the poor of Munich and Owen's treatment of his own workers at New Lanark. These Mudie hailed as examples of the principle that if you treat the poor with kindness they will respond positively and their character will improve. There was also a long article

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<sup>256</sup> *The Economist*, No. 7 (10 March 1821).

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

about the Shaker community in the USA as an example of communal living. Mudie even tried to use biblical references as evidence that Owen's plan was not hostile to Christianity: an indication that Owen's views on religion were still, in Mudie's eyes, an obstacle.<sup>259</sup>

Readers letters were frequently printed; often of considerable length and occasionally taking over a whole edition. The general tone of the correspondence was supportive towards co-operative ideas but not always agreeing with everything that Owen or Mudie had said. The letter writers were, in the main, middle-class philanthropists who broadly supported Owen's plan. Their tone tended to be upbeat, polite, benign and encouraging; they wanted the plan to succeed even if they had doubts or queries about how it was going to work. There were very few letters on the subject of economics, most being about the more philosophical aspects of the plan. The few that were hostile or negative invariably drew counter-arguments from several correspondents. Mudie usually printed these letters without comment, only occasionally intervening if he felt that the debates were getting too heated.

As far as this history is concerned, the most interesting letters were those which revealed behind-the-scenes details about Mudie and his fellow Society members. From one, we learn that so few people turned up to Mudie's first lecture in August 1820 that the planned follow-up was cancelled; an indication, perhaps, that there was only limited interest in Owen's plan.<sup>260</sup> In reply to another letter, Mudie revealed that the Co-operative and Economical Society contained "more men of fortune, more individuals of the liberal professions, than workmen" and that his own financial circumstances were comfortable:

My income is in the present state of society larger than my proportion can be of an equitable association; and is sufficient to command at least as many of the physical comforts of life, as it will be in the power of such an association to afford to its members.<sup>261</sup>

And a quote from "Philadelphus" provided a rare glimpse of Mudie himself, the *bon viveur*:

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<sup>259</sup> Two years later it still was. "I have been for a long time completely satisfied of the utter falsehood of all religion, and of the absolute necessity for its downfall. My conviction has been formed after mature reconsideration of that subject, and it is impossible that it should ever change. Every fact is directly opposed to it. I now speak my sentiments respecting it without disguise. I still think it premature, however, to attack it through the medium of the press." G. Mudie, Letter to R. Owen, 3 January 1823.

<sup>260</sup> *The Economist*, No. 25 (14 July 1821), letter from "Index"

<sup>261</sup> *The Economist*, No. 46 (8 December 1821), in response to letter from "N.O."

I know you well enough to be assured that you have not the spirit of a martyr, unless martyrdom should come in the shape of claret and savoury viands.<sup>262</sup>

Although he usually praised Owen unreservedly, Mudie was not afraid to criticise him, gently but firmly undermining his mentor's public announcement that the villages of community would dispense with the plough in order to dig the land with spades. Owen had claimed that Falla's experiment had proved that spade husbandry was better for the soil, as well as being more economical.<sup>263</sup> His enthusiasm had been ridiculed by his opponents; the Marquis of Londonderry telling Parliament

The hon. member had told us that the spade was preferable to the plough, and that we should never be happy until we were all digging.<sup>264</sup>

Responding to a letter which had argued that cultivation of crops by plough was more profitable than by spade, Mudie tactfully suggested that the subject needed further analysis:

The Spade Husbandry question, ... has been much misunderstood, not only by the Public generally, but by many of the well-wishers of the Plan, and has not, I think, been stated with sufficient fullness and precision by Mr. Owen himself.<sup>265</sup>

He argued that a straightforward cost comparison between spade and plough husbandry was not enough. The point, which by implication Owen had missed, was that co-operative societies would want to deploy the skills of their members where they would be of most value to the society, and if those skills could be applied more productively outside agriculture the societies would be better off buying in their agricultural produce. He also reminded his readers that *value* was not the same as *wages*:

And this value, be it remembered, though it forms the real cost price of the Society's labour, is not to be obtained as the *wages* of labour, but in the amount of the *whole produce* of the industry of the Society, including not only that proportion which usually goes for wages, but – the farmer's profits, the master

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<sup>262</sup> *The Economist*, No. 42 (10 November 1821). "Philadelphus", a regular contributor to *The Economist*, has been identified as Benjamin Scott Jones, a civil servant at the India Office; see G. Claeys, *Benjamin Scott Jones, alias Philadelphus: an early Owenite Socialist*, in *Bulletin – Society for the Study of Labour History*, Autumn 1981, Issue 43, p. 14.

<sup>263</sup> R. Owen, *Report to the County of Lanark* (1820).

<sup>264</sup> *Hansard*, 26 June 1821.

<sup>265</sup> *The Economist*, No. 33 (8 September 1821).

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tradesman's profits, the manufacturer and merchant's profits, and the profit upon skill, superintendence, mechanical power, and capital!<sup>266</sup>

As long as the existing economic system prevailed, he said, the value of labour would differ from industry to industry, which would lead co-operative societies to concentrate their energies on the most profitable activities that it was possible for them to undertake: a local example of the economic planning which he advocated on a national scale. A society consisting entirely of stocking-makers would therefore abandon their depressed trade in favour of spade husbandry. At the other extreme, a society which had an eminent artist amongst its members would be foolish to use him in agriculture. Until such time as an equalisation of labour value occurred (excepting "works of genius"), the survival of societies could depend on how carefully they made those choices.<sup>267</sup>

There followed a trenchant critique of the political economists' belief that capital was "an intelligent, unerring and beneficent being" and, if left to its own devices, would ensure the right balance between supply and demand. Mudie argued that capital was only interested in increasing its own bulk without regard for public prosperity and therefore it should be regulated:

it ought no longer to have reposed in it the sole power over the happiness and welfare of nations, but ought now to be brought under the beneficial control of society, and of healthful rational arrangements to be formed by it, instead of being suffered as heretofore, to determine the fates of men by its blind and inexorable influence, regardless of the general good, dispensing at least as many calamities, both public and private, as blessings, and generally even ignorant of the best and most certain means of promoting its own accumulation.<sup>268</sup>

The political economists, in his view, had convinced themselves that each individual was the best judge of how to promote his own happiness and welfare; but this was plainly not true, as most people lacked the power to control their own activities. Therefore, they had introduced the idea of capital as the agent which would bring prosperity and happiness to the

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<sup>266</sup> *The Economist*, No. 34 (15 September 1821).

<sup>267</sup> *The Economist*, Nos. 33, 34, 35 and 36. Much later, Mudie indicated that Owen had been annoyed by these articles, but he robustly defended himself: "I had been guilty of treason against your autocracy by beginning, even as long ago as 1821 in *The Economist*, a controversy upon the Spade Husbandry question, as it happened that I had even then real knowledge sufficient to be able to demonstrate that the adoption of Spade Husbandry, which was one of your pet 'views and objects', would be deeply injurious if not fatal to the success of any one or all of your intended new villages or other co-operative communities." Letter to R. Owen, 29 August 1848

<sup>268</sup> *The Economist*, No. 36 (29 September 1821).

whole community. They were so in awe of the power that they had attributed to capital that they were unable to take control when it failed to do its supposed job; leading themselves into such “irreconcilable contradictions and endless perplexities” that they succeeded only in

leaving society precisely in the condition in which their systems found it, without any one advantage having been derived or being derivable from their profound and truly philosophical labours!<sup>269</sup>

Mudie chastised the “childish theories” of the political economists which, taken to their logical conclusion, would leave governments with little to do except collect taxes, abandoning all concern about the creation and distribution of wealth for the common good of society, as these would be taken care of by the market. The political economists, however, could not be trusted with such responsibility. They worshipped material wealth, no matter how basely it may have been accumulated. They eschewed discussion of concepts such as the health, happiness and intellectual well-being of mankind in the hope that people would come to believe

that the wealth of nations is something distinct and separate from the comfort, the abundance, the enjoyments, the intelligence and virtue of their members!<sup>270</sup>

They even claimed that misery and vice were God’s will, and that happiness and virtue were

inconsistent with the design of the Creator, and that if the means of rendering mankind happy were now adopted, the consequent increase of their numbers, ordained for that purpose by the Deity, would soon replunge them into a situation of greater poverty, wretchedness, and crime, than that from which they had presumed to escape!<sup>271</sup>

In the midst of his full-blooded attack on capitalism, which seems to transcend the bounds of Owen’s plan, Mudie took pains to reassure his readers that neither Owen nor his followers were

hostile to the accumulation of wealth, or insensible to the value and utility which may be derived from the command of capital, and its wise and judicious application and employment; or that they are desirous of withdrawing it, by force or by stratagem, from the hands in which it is now vested, or of

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid. Karl Marx was to put it even more succinctly: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways: the point, however, is to change it.” (*The German Ideology*, 1845).

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

depriving them of any one of the individual advantages to be derived from its possession.<sup>272</sup>

It was as if, temporarily, Mudie had burst out of the ideological straight-jacket that his belief in Owen had imposed upon him, and was now putting it back on. He would, in future, make many other scathing attacks on capitalist political economy, but would always maintain that those who already possessed wealth would never have it taken from them. He did, however, make it clear, far more strongly than Owen ever would, that capital's power over people's lives must be broken:

The New System will render capital subservient to the real interest and welfare, and to the judicious and enlightened direction, of society, instead of society remaining, what it has hitherto been, subservient to the mischievous errors, the caprices, the ignorance, the unprincipled and unrelenting despotism of capital.<sup>273</sup>

Mudie then challenged the supposition that capital always found the most profitable channel for its employment. He argued that farmers claimed that there was too much capital invested in agriculture and that the resultant excess of produce rendered further cultivation unprofitable. However, there was no evidence, he said, of farmers either withdrawing capital or reducing the amount of land that they cultivated. In fact, more wheat had been produced in the last year than in any previous one. The political economists claimed that such a situation could not last long; either the market would expand or cultivation be curtailed and the superfluous capital deployed elsewhere. Such claims, according to Mudie, flew in the face of reality, as unless markets expanded, farmers would have no superfluous capital to reinvest; in fact, they would have no capital at all. Genuinely superfluous capital, he said, *should* be withdrawn; but the political economists, having confused theory with practice, had assumed, with disastrous consequences, that this is what had actually happened.

Even where capital was deployed profitably it was not necessarily to the advantage of either those whom it employed or society as a whole. In its attempts to protect itself it diminished the value of labour, causing hardship and starvation; but this was regarded as acceptable as long as it made a profit:

So long as by the reduction of the value of labour, by the unremitting toil of one half of the starving labourers, and the consignment of the other half to work-houses and gaols, by the bankruptcy of competitors, and the infliction

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

of miseries which are even intolerable, it can add an annual per centage to its own amount, so long does it rejoice in the *profitableness* and *prosperity* of its concerns, and so long do those theorists in Political Economy, who are the sole *visionaries* on this subject, continue to regard its employment as *advantageous*!<sup>274</sup>

These are powerful essays. Mudie's long experience in journalism had given him a writing style both lucid and forceful. Although, like many other writers of his time, his sentences and paragraphs can be long, he is able to arrest the reader's attention with a short, pithy statement. For example:

The Collective Affairs of Men have hitherto been very grossly mismanaged.<sup>275</sup>

There are few errors which have been more fatal to humanity, – to the true interests of society, – than that of Political Economists regarding capital.<sup>276</sup>

But having once fairly laid hold of Capital, my Readers will not be surprised to find, that, like most other persons, I am unwilling to relinquish it.<sup>277</sup>

He does not talk down to his readers, but his tone is didactical: a school-master exhorting pupils to pay close attention to a particularly important point, or a scientist briefing his students before carrying out a forensic examination:

It is indeed one of the corner-stones – a part of the foundation of the whole fabric we are about to raise. I beg of my Readers, therefore, to examine it thoroughly – to strive to comprehend it fully – and never again, for a single instant, in the course of the enquiry, to lose sight of this master-truth.<sup>278</sup>

If my readers will reflect closely for a few minutes on the matter, they will easily see that the above result is inevitable.<sup>279</sup>

Though this is a very simple and almost a self-evident proposition, yet, in consequence of its embracing circumstances and arrangements on which men have not been accustomed to think with accuracy, its elucidation is rather difficult. I hope, however, to render it perfectly clear and intelligible, if my

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<sup>274</sup> *The Economist*, No. 38 (13 October 1821).

<sup>275</sup> *The Economist*, Prospectus.

<sup>276</sup> *The Economist*, No. 7 (10 March 1821).

<sup>277</sup> *The Economist*, No. 38 (13 October 1821).

<sup>278</sup> *The Economist* No. 1 (27 January 1821)

<sup>279</sup> *The Economist*, No. 3 (10 February 1821).



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Readers will excuse the seeming tediousness of the explanations. The primary importance of the question demands that indulgence.<sup>280</sup>

And Mudie used his polemical ability to pour scorn on those with whom he disagreed:

Mr. Malthus, upon this subject, as upon many others, flatly contradicts himself.<sup>281</sup>

The fallacy of Lord Liverpool's assumption, therefore, is made evident.<sup>282</sup>

This mistake of Dr. Hall as to the first cause of poverty, renders all his clear and forcible reasonings, and his extensive knowledge of the subject, nearly useless.<sup>283</sup>

These marked tendencies in Mudie's style are also to be found throughout the *Letters to Ricardo* and *Vindication of Mr. Owen's Plan*, as the earlier quotes from those pamphlets illustrate,<sup>284</sup> and the case for Mudie's authorship of those writings becomes very strong.

Following the demise of *The Economist* Mudie continued as editor of *The Sun*, while still running the Spa Fields community, giving weekly lectures on Owenism and debating with political economists at public meetings.<sup>285</sup> Owen himself became more publicly active, setting up the British and Foreign Philanthropic Society in order to raise funds for his proposed community at Motherwell and embarking on a lecture tour of Ireland. Mudie followed his progress with great interest, writing to Owen to point out that the answer the latter had given to a question about rent was not only incorrect but potentially damaging to his cause. He even offered to fully explain the issue to the press, but acknowledged that it would be better if Owen did so himself. Like a spin doctor trying to keep his client "on message", he urged Owen to concentrate on economic arguments:

It is by Political Economy that your system must triumph. The world must be convinced that it will be productive of increased wealth, as well as of increased

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<sup>280</sup> *The Economist*, No. 34 (15 September 1821).

<sup>281</sup> *The Economist*, No. 5 (24 February 1821).

<sup>282</sup> *The Economist*, No. 3 (10 February 1821).

<sup>283</sup> *The Economist*, No. 4 (17 February 1821).

<sup>284</sup> See above, Chapter 4.

<sup>285</sup> G. Mudie, Letter to R. Owen, 3 January 1823. His debating skills were not always deployed as successfully as he claimed. *The Morning Post* of 2 August 1823 reports a meeting where Mudie was shouted down for responding to a question which had already been answered and was later ridiculed for using wooden blocks as visual aids to represent the different classes of society.

intelligence. The latter, though the more valuable, is of secondary importance in the estimation of the present generation.<sup>286</sup>

To carry forward this idea, Mudie started another journal, *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*, which commenced publication on 11 January 1823. It continued from where *The Economist* had left off, the main differences being that it contained far fewer letters from readers and its editorials, still signed “M. The Economist”, were solely concerned with economics. There were regular progress reports from the Spa Fields community, but Owen’s name was only occasionally mentioned.

At the outset Mudie declared that, while all classes would benefit from the system of co-operation, his primary concern was for the welfare of the working classes:

It is time that an advocate should appear on behalf of those who have been hitherto almost friendless, and who, understanding their actual condition, their privations and their wants, their necessities and their sufferings, their past disappointments and their future and just expectations, shall commit himself wholly to their cause, identify his interests and his feelings with theirs ...<sup>287</sup>

Having attacked political economists as a group in his earlier publication, Mudie now confronted their most eminent voice, Ricardo, whose theory of value was that

The value of a commodity, or the quantity of any other commodity for which it will exchange, depends upon the relative quantity of labour which is necessary for its production, and not on the greater or lesser compensation which is paid for that labour.<sup>288</sup>

Ricardo’s theory begged the question that if labour was the source of value (and, by inference, wealth), why did the labourer receive such a meagre proportion of the value of his product? But this was not a question that interested Ricardo. For him, labour was a commodity which, once bought, became the property of the capitalist, along with all the produce of that labour. And, as the value of any commodity reflected the amount of labour involved in producing it, the value of a man’s labour could be no more than what was required to make him work, although market forces would influence the price.

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*, No 1 (11 Jan 1823).

<sup>288</sup> D. Ricardo, *On The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), Chapter 1.

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Labour, like all other things which are purchased and sold, and which may be increased or diminished in quantity, has its natural and its market price. The natural price of labour is that price which is necessary to enable the labourers one with another to subsist, and to perpetuate their race without either increase or diminution. However much the market price of labour may deviate from its natural price, it has, like all other commodities, a tendency to conform to it.<sup>289</sup>

Mudie prefaced his first editorial with the above quote and then proceeded to savage it. There was no such thing, he said, as a *natural* price of labour. There was only an *artificial* price, or wages, which, under the present system, tended to sink to subsistence level or even lower, to the point where “the wretched subsistence of families in full employment has been eked out by parochial assistance!”<sup>290</sup> Ricardo’s claim that this represented a natural law was both confused and morally repugnant:

The price of *labour* is the price of the *labourer* himself. The unequivocal avowal, at the present time, of a proposition for fixing the price of the greater number of *human beings* at that which would merely enable them to exist, and of a design to wring from them the exertion of unceasing toil, as the only condition, even, on which they should be permitted to drag out a life of incessant labour and cheerless poverty, would be received with general and just abhorrence.<sup>291</sup>

Mr Ricardo himself, bewildered by the errors of his own theory, which, instead of being constructed, as the science of which he treats ought to have instructed him, on the principle of endeavouring to effect the production of the greatest possible sum of human happiness, is constructed on the presumption that the majority of human beings are nothing more than mercantile commodities, subject at all times to be sacrificed for the most sordid considerations, – Mr Ricardo himself, but for the debasing influence of those fallacious reasonings to which his mind has so long been accustomed, would have started back from a conclusion to which the very design and purpose of the science of Political Economy is directly opposed!<sup>292</sup>

Ricardo’s “vicious error” was one of the tenets of political economy and even radicals such as Cobbett had accepted his analysis, prompting Mudie to compare him unfavourably with Malthus. Although Cobbett bitterly opposed Malthus over the issue of the Poor Law, they had similarly

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., Chapter 5.

<sup>290</sup> *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*, No 1 (11 Jan 1823), p. 3.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

pessimistic views of human nature, believing that unless people were motivated by the fear of poverty they would fall into vice and laziness. In his *Cottage Economy* Cobbett had said “the married man has no right to expect the same plenty of food and raiment that the single man has.” Mudie, who was no fan of Cobbett, was quick to point out what he saw as a contradiction between the two men’s public personas and their actual views; even mischievously suggesting that large quantities of Cobbett’s book had been bought up by the rich for free distribution to the poor:

Can there be a stronger proof of the mischievous influence exercised over the practice of society by the spurious systems of the science, than to find a popular writer like Mr Cobbett, in a work especially addressed to those of the working classes who have families, giving expression to a mistaken opinion, which, from its unpalatable nature, we may be assured he himself firmly believed to be well founded and correct? It is not a little singular that Mr Malthus, who is so generally regarded as an enemy of the poor, has expressed in his *Principles* his regret that the labour of the working classes is excessive, and that Mr Cobbett, whom many of them consider as their champion, and friend, has, in one of his late publications, insisted on the *necessity* for the exertion of *constant industry* for the attainment of the *necessities of life*.<sup>293</sup>

Having denied that labour had a natural price, Mudie claimed that it did, however, have a natural reward, and that *his* system of political economy was founded on two principles:

*That Labour is the Source of Wealth. That the producers of Wealth are in justice entitled to the enjoyment or disposal of all fruits, or productions of their own industry.*<sup>294</sup>

He immediately acknowledged that the rich and powerful might oppose the introduction of such principles on the grounds that the rights and privileges they already possessed would be threatened. As he had in *The Economist*, Mudie tried to reassure the wealthy that their possessions would not be taken from them; the new principles would apply only to the creation and distribution of new wealth:

If, holding existing interests as sacred, we are nevertheless satisfied that many of them ought never to have arisen, and that they in some degree obstruct the advancement of the public welfare and happiness, it cannot be wrong that we

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10. For an account of Cobbett’s views on Malthus see James P. Huzel, *The Popularization of Malthus in Early 19th Century England* (Ashgate Publishing, 2006), Chapter 3.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p. 18, Mudie’s italics. The words would not have been out of place in Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution between 1918 and 1995.

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should at least desire to limit the further *increase* of such interests and rights as have originated in error or injustice, and are now useless or injurious in themselves.<sup>295</sup>

If labour was the source of all wealth, it followed that the labourers not only supported themselves, but the whole of society. Mudie's premise was strikingly put:

That the Working Classes support the Paupers, or really pay the Poor's Rates, – That the same Working Classes sustain all the other burthens of the State, – That all income, whether obtained in the shape of profits, rents, rates, or taxes, is solely derived from the fruits of their own industry, – That the Working Classes are entirely self-supported, or in other words, that they themselves pay their own wages, and lastly, That the present amount of the reward for their labour, which they are permitted to retain under the name of wages, may be increased eight-fold without diminishing the wealth now enjoyed by the other classes of the people.<sup>296</sup>

To those who argued that the land was the sole source of wealth, Mudie countered that although land, left unattended, was able to produce animal and vegetable matter this was of insufficient quantity to sustain more than a small number of people. It required human intervention to ensure that the land was able to support an entire population. Land, therefore, was a *passive* agent in wealth production, whereas labour was an *active* one, and Mudie condemned the political economists who treated the labourer as a mercantile commodity or secondary agent. In particular, he criticised James Mill, who had claimed that both the capitalist and the labourer, and even in some cases, the consumer, contributed to wealth creation.<sup>297</sup> Mudie dismissed this claim as “very erroneous and mischievous” and argued that only *productive* labourers contributed to the national wealth; neither household servants nor employers who did not themselves work were included in his definition.<sup>298</sup> But, if the unproductive consumers did not contribute to wealth, they were certainly able to influence production by creating demand for the things that *they* required, even though this

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>297</sup> J. Mill, *Elements of Political Economy* (1821). In a rare demonstration of carelessness, Mudie incorrectly spelt Mill's name (calling him “Mr Mills”) and admitted that he had not read his book. This lapse led him to rather overstate Mill's argument, as the latter had applied the term *productive consumption* only to items consumed in order to further the productive process.

<sup>298</sup> Mill would have agreed about servants but not about capitalists. In fact he stated, more bluntly than either Smith or Ricardo, that the capitalist was the “owner” of the labour for which he had paid wages.

had the effect of obstructing the production of the basic necessities for working-class people. In a passage of white heat, Mudie argued that the political economists' artificial and restricted concept of "demand" caused mass unemployment and dire poverty:

yet the productive energies of these millions are unemployed and suffered to run waste, and a great portion of mankind are subjected to all the evils of destitution! – because, – the Ruling Theorists have thought fit to consider them as mere marketable things, that must necessarily be subjected to the capricious sway of an indefinable power which they have called *Demand*; and *because*, however general may be the evils of poverty, however loud may be the *real* and *natural* demand sent forth by the actual and *unsatisfied wants* of the majority of mankind, – the spurious theorists will not permit these *Productive Agents* to be employed, – these *Sources of Wealth* to be opened, – until the artificial, fluctuating, and *restricted Demand*, created by the erroneous practices of society, and perpetuated by the pernicious fallacies of spurious Political Economy, shall chance to require their services.<sup>299</sup>

Returning to the disparity between how much wealth the working classes created and how much of it they retained, Mudie acknowledged the difficulty of calculating a precise ratio. He said that statistics from the Population Act indicated that the productive classes only retained one-fifteenth part of the wealth which they had produced; whereas an earlier estimate, by Charles Hall, had given the figure as one-ninth,<sup>300</sup> and a more recent calculation had shown it to be as low as one twenty-fourth. Two years earlier, in his first flush of Owenite enthusiasm, Mudie had claimed that Hall's analysis of the causes of poverty was incorrect and thus dismissed his conclusions as being founded upon error:

This mistake of Dr Hall, as to the first cause of poverty, renders all his clear and forcible reasonings and his extensive knowledge of the subject, nearly useless, – since he thinks it necessary that the opulent should be dispossessed of their riches, – and that wealth should be equally distributed; – and since the remedy he proposes would still leave the true cause of poverty in full and destructive operation.<sup>301</sup>

In *The Universal Philanthropist*, however, he softened his stance, praising the general accuracy of Hall's calculations and the incontrovertible methodology he had used, while still rejecting Hall's proposed remedies. In a

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 38

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., p. 42. A slip of the pen; Hall's figure was actually one-eighth, the figure Mudie had used earlier.

<sup>301</sup> *The Economist*, No. 4 (17 February 1821).

forceful passage, Mudie expressed identical views to Hall's on the relationship between wealth and power. Neither interest nor profits, he said,

are really the fruits of the industry of the persons by whom they are enjoyed. They are the *claims* which they have acquired, – the *power* which they exercise, over the industry of others, over the productions of the mass of the people. Taking the present average wages of labour at twelve shillings per week, a person having an income of one thousand a year, possesses the means of absolutely commanding the services, *during their whole lives*, of *thirty-two* labourers.<sup>302</sup>

Mudie then added some calculations of his own, comparing the amount of labour that it took to build a house and the proportion of the labourer's income that he paid out in rent. Using figures supplied by builders, he claimed that it took twenty workmen five years to build twenty four-storey houses; in other words, each house represented five years' labour for one man. Such houses, he said, were then let to six families, each of which paid around one-fifth of their wages in rent. As the houses were let on ninety-nine-year leases it was reasonable to expect that they would stand for at least 100 years. Therefore, the full amount of rent paid over the life of the house equated to one-fifth of the labour of six men for 100 years, which was 120 man-years. When this was compared to the amount of labour that it took to build the house it could be seen that labourers only retained one twenty-fourth of the fruits of their labour:

They erect a building at a cost of five years' labour; but they afterwards pay *a hundred and twenty years' labour for permission to occupy it*.<sup>303</sup>

*The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist* contains much strong writing. Freed from the need to proselytise Owen's philosophical ideas, Mudie delivered a fierce attack on capitalist economic theory. Unfortunately, the journal ceased publication after only four issues, probably for financial reasons. Before the first issue, he had said that it was to be financed by 100 shares of a guinea each and that over forty shares had already been raised;<sup>304</sup> perhaps the final share take up was insufficient to sustain prolonged publication.

This seems an appropriate place to stop and take stock of Mudie's contribution to the development of anti-capitalist economic ideas, and to look at him in the context of similar writers of his generation.

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<sup>302</sup> *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*, No 1 (18 Jan 1823), p. 13; cf. C. Hallop cit., pp. 39-40; also, *The Economist* No. 7 (10 March 1821).

<sup>303</sup> *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*, No. 3 (8 February 1823), pp. 49-53.

<sup>304</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 3 January 1823.

Mudie's articles in *The Economist* are the earliest surviving examples from within the Owenite movement of a sustained critique of capitalism. Owen himself, of course, had condemned the notion of "buying cheap and selling dear"; he had formulated a labour theory of value which had led him to argue that the labour note should become the principal means of exchange;<sup>305</sup> and, along with Sismondi, he had articulated an under-consumption theory. But Owen had kept his explanations to a minimum and it was his disciples who developed his ideas and added some of their own through mutual discussion and personal reflection. The two best-known Owenite writers, William Thompson and John Gray, began to plan their economic treatises in the early 1820s, although they were not published until 1824 and 1826 respectively.

Thompson's influential *Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth* (1824), included elements of moral philosophy, economic theory and social science. Thompson, a disciple of Jeremy Bentham, believed that the underlying principle of society was to provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Bentham, however, had also argued that security, of both person and property, was the most important factor in maintaining happiness and that therefore any notion that more equal distribution of wealth would increase general happiness must fail if it threatened security of property. Thompson rebutted Bentham's case by saying that if labour was the source of all wealth, the labourer's security would be increased by being able to retain the wealth that he had created, which in turn would motivate him to create more wealth. He argued that the economy would benefit from a more equal distribution of wealth and criticised political economists for concentrating their scientific analysis on wealth creation alone. In Thompson's view, the present system of distribution was based on compulsion, the "surplus value" of a man's labour, being forcibly "abstracted" by the capitalist in return for the use of machinery and raw materials. He advocated that all the products of labour should be secured to their producers and that both labour itself, and the exchange of the products of that labour, should be free and voluntary.

Thompson followed this with the book which has established him as the first British male feminist: *Appeal of One Half the Human Race* (1825). Dedicated to, and based on the ideas of, his friend Anna Wheeler, Thompson's book argued the case for complete equality between men and women. This, Thompson wrote, could not be achieved under the present system of individual competition which reduced women, particularly married women, to a state of slavery, but only in the Owenite villages of co-operation. Thompson also recognised that "women's work", such as childcare and housework, was under-valued and therefore presented a

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<sup>305</sup> See above, p. 51.



major barrier to women becoming useful and respected members of the community. To rectify this, he persuaded the London Co-operative Society to incorporate into its plan for a community a commitment to sharing domestic duties among both sexes: an important development within the co-operative movement.

Like Owen, Thompson was a strong believer in community of property, but he realised that equality of distribution did not sit easily alongside entitlement to the full fruits of one's labour. In *Labor Rewarded* (1826) he attempted to reconcile the two positions by suggesting that either the labourer could voluntarily relinquish part of the product of his labour for the greater good of the community, or that each person within a community would contribute an equal amount of labour; but these were uneasy compromises, as the friction at Orbiston would later reveal. Later, Thompson would have sharp differences with Owen, disagreeing with the latter's courting of the rich and famous, his dismissal of the need for political reform and his reliance on large, private capital-financed communities rather than worker-based, self-funded projects. Thompson had enough support within the co-operative movement to threaten Owen's authority, but any possibility of a split in the Owenite ranks ended when Thompson suddenly died in 1833.

John Gray's *Lecture on Human Happiness* appeared in 1826. Gray followed Thompson's starting point of relating economic arguments to the science of human happiness, but much of his pamphlet was devoted to an analysis, using Colquhoun's tables, of the productivity of each section of society. In Gray's view, only those who cultivated the earth, put its produce to use or distributed that produce could be considered as productive labourers. Those who governed, amused, instructed or medically treated mankind were also productive, and Gray estimated that the combined productive classes only received one fifth of the wealth that they had created. Everyone else, he said, was unproductive, and, unless they gave an equivalent for what they consumed, were useless as well.<sup>306</sup> Gray's comments about how many people from the unproductive classes were really necessary, based entirely on his moral judgements, make interesting reading. For example:

No. 35. Shopkeepers and Tradesmen retailing goods. Certain it is that these men are not unproductive, for never upon the face of the earth was there any thing half so productive of deception and falsehood, folly and extravagance, slavery of the corporeal, and prostitution of the intellectual faculties of man, as the present system of retail trade.

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<sup>306</sup> In the light of Thompson's pioneering work of the previous year, Gray's rather bald statement begs the question of how he viewed domestic duties, to which he does not specifically refer.

No. 41. Hawkers, Pedlars &c. These men are productive only of mischief and are of no use on earth.

No. 48. Persons confined in prison for debt. Here is a glorious specimen of the present system. We first put it into the power of 17,500 individuals to get *into* debt; and then put them in prison, to prevent the possibility of getting *out of it*.<sup>307</sup>

Although Gray would later write that his ideas were not incompatible with Owen's, he was never really a mainstream Owenite. Like Mudie, he strongly disagreed with the concept of community of property and also believed that agriculture and manufacturing industry should be planned and organised centrally. Gray provided more detail about his planned economy than Mudie did about his own: capital and land would be donated, in return for a fixed annual payment, to a National Chamber of Commerce, who would regulate wages, prices, distribution and production targets.<sup>308</sup> Gray, however, remained silent about what would happen to landowners and capitalists who opted out of his system.

The Owenites were not the only opponents of capitalist economic theories at this time. In his pamphlet *Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital* (1825), Thomas Hodgskin also argued that the interests of capital and labour were opposed and denied that capital had any just claim to its monopoly of the national wealth. In Mudie-ish style, he ridiculed the claims that political economists had made on its behalf:

Capital, the reader will suppose, must have some wonderful properties, when the labourer pays so exorbitantly for it. In fact, its claims are founded on its wonderful properties, and to them, therefore, I mean especially to direct his attention.<sup>309</sup>

He analysed the alleged wealth-creating properties of circulating and fixed capital: the food, clothing and raw materials without which the labourer would be unable to work, and the tools and machinery which improve the quality and quantity of the labour. These items, he argued, were not an accumulated stock that capitalists handed out to labourers, but the products of someone else's labour. The capitalist merely acted as middle-man, giving the labourer the barest minimum wage to buy food and clothes and keeping for himself the greater part of labour's value.

Hodgskin, however, was a supporter of individual liberty, self-interest, competition and the free market, opposing all government interfer-

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<sup>307</sup> J. Gray, *Lecture on Human Happiness* (1825).

<sup>308</sup> J Gray, *The Social System* (1831), pp. 30-40.

<sup>309</sup> T. Hodgskin, *Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital* (1825), p. 32.

ence, whether it be factory reform or combination laws. He believed that capitalists and labourers should be allowed to negotiate their respective shares of the profits. In his view, capitalists who were also master manufacturers could be regarded as “productive labour”, and therefore entitled to a reward for their labour. But “idle capitalists”, who contributed no labour at all, were not so entitled, and Hodgskin condemned them as well as their political economist apologists:

Not only do they appropriate the produce of the labourer; but they have succeeded in persuading him that they are his benefactors and employers. At least such are the doctrines of political economy; and capitalists may well be pleased with a science which both justifies their claims and holds them up to our admiration, as the great means of civilising and improving the world.<sup>310</sup>

Because Hodgskin, Thompson and Gray all took Ricardo’s definition of value as the starting point for their claims for labour’s entitlement to its full reward, they have been labelled by some historians as “Ricardian Socialists”. Other writers, such as John Francis Bray, Thomas Rowe Edmonds and Piercy Ravenstone,<sup>311</sup> have often been included under this heading, but Mudie’s name has not normally been mentioned in this context.<sup>312</sup> He seems to have been relegated to a lower division of Owenite writers who were “concerned to popularize rather than make original contributions to socialist economic theory”.<sup>313</sup>

Irrespective of labels, these writers created a body of work which provided counter-arguments to the prevailing capitalist economic orthodoxy during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>314</sup> Mudie had his

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>311</sup> P. Ravenstone, *A few doubts as to the correctness of some opinions generally entertained on the subjects of Population and Political Economy* (1821); T. R. Edmonds, *Practical Moral and Political Economy* 1828); J. F. Bray, *Labour’s Wrongs and Labour’s Remedy* (1839). All contain strong anti-capitalist critiques, although Ravenstone’s anti-Semitism and Edmonds’s views on the breeding of the poor make uncomfortable reading.

<sup>312</sup> G. Claeys, op. cit., pp. 67-89 is the main exception, arguing that Mudie’s advocacy of a planned economy was one of the foundations of what he termed “economic socialism”.

<sup>313</sup> J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 65.

<sup>314</sup> In developing their far more detailed critique of capitalism, Marx and Engels would later dismiss these earlier writers as utopian, non-scientific or petty bourgeois socialists; a debate which lies beyond the scope of this book. For a detailed comparison of the economic views of Thompson, Gray and Mudie see G. Claeys, op. cit. For Ricardian socialism see M. Beer, op. cit.; H. S. Foxwell, *Introduction to A. Menger, The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour* (1899); E. Lowenthal, *The Ricardian Socialists* (1911); J. E. King, *Utopian or Scientific? A Reconsideration of the Ricardian Socialists in History of Political Economy*, (Duke University Press, Fall 1983); N. Thompson, *The People’s Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1984); and D. McNally, *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique* (Verso, 1993).

own distinctive voice within that group, although he would surely have balked at being referred to as “Ricardian”. Of all the early anti-capitalist writers, only Mudie and Gray argued that the free market was incapable of self-regulation, could not act in the best interests of society and should therefore be replaced by a centrally-planned economy. While the other writers attacked Malthus, Mill and political economists in general, only Mudie and Hodgskin directly confronted the economic theories of Ricardo himself.<sup>315</sup> And Mudie was one of the strongest critics of the political economists’ attribution to capital of almost mythical powers, showing recognition of a concept that Marx would develop into his theory of commodity fetishism:

The fashionable Political Economists have invested Capital with such absolute infallibility, and with so many mysterious and sacred attributes, that, even where it is palpably entailing upon itself its own annihilation, such is the habitual reverence of them and their pupils, for this absolute and unerring arbiter of the public prosperity, that they dare not take upon themselves to direct its application, nor even to recommend salutary changes in its Common operations, be they ever so wasteful or injurious; but, confining all their cares to the purity and integrity of the currency, behold in awestruck admiration the operations of this omnipotent agent, – rather distrust their own senses than venture to controul [sic] its unsearchable ways, – and adore in reverential silence the power which they so fervently love even amidst the calamitous chastisements to which its misgovernment so frequently gives birth!<sup>316</sup>

The main building blocks of Mudie’s economic ideas were now in place. He would refine them over the years, particularly his thoughts on a planned economy, which he would amplify and update in the wake of the French Revolution of 1848, but he would not radically depart from them. What would change radically though were Mudie’s fortunes, which continued on an upward curve throughout 1823 and 1824 but came crashing down during a disastrous association with the co-operative community at Orbiston.

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<sup>315</sup> Ravenstone, op. cit., mainly targeted Malthus; Gray, op. cit., included a lengthy critique of Mill.

<sup>316</sup> *The Economist*, No. 36 (29 September 1821).

## Orbiston and Edinburgh

*Thrown destitute, with my large family,  
upon the world.*<sup>317</sup>

It is not known how long Mudie remained at *The Sun* following his departure from Spa Fields. He was still on the paper in June 1823, when he made a dramatic intervention at a public meeting in support of Spanish independence, claiming that the French government, who had sent troops into Spain to restore the absolute monarchy of Ferdinand VII, had tried to bribe his newspaper to plant stories in support of their actions.<sup>318</sup>

By October 1824, however, he had left *The Sun* to start his own newspaper, *The Eclipse*.<sup>319</sup> This was an evening paper, published six days a week (including Christmas Day) and, as such, a direct rival to *The Sun*; hence, perhaps, its name. It carried news, classified adverts, stock exchange and agricultural market prices, army and navy general orders, bankruptcies and insolvency hearings, poetry, police reports and sport. *The Eclipse* had an attractive, professional look to it; its articles were clearly presented, well printed and well written, if a trifle bland. Particularly strong was its coverage of foreign news, taken from a wide range of foreign newspapers. Mudie appeared to be very well-informed and would take other papers to task if he thought that they were misleading their readers by shoddy reporting: *The Times*, for example, over its reports of Simon Bolivar's battles with Spanish forces during the liberation of Peru. He also claimed a scoop for *The Eclipse* by predicting, well ahead of his rivals, the name of the next ambassador to France. However, apart from the initial editorial which said that Britain was "in a period of almost profound tranquillity",<sup>320</sup> there was a complete absence of political comment. Owen's *Report to the Select Committee on the Employment of the Poor in Ireland* was printed in full, but Mudie resisted any temptation to add his own views. *The Eclipse* was clearly aimed at a mainstream audience.

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<sup>317</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848.

<sup>318</sup> *The Morning Chronicle*, 14 June 1823; *The Sun*, 14 June 1823, *The York Herald*, 21 June 1823; *The Leeds Mercury*, 21 June 1823; *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 18 June 1823. True to its hostility towards Mudie, *The Intelligencer* declared that his claim was a complete fabrication.

<sup>319</sup> The first edition of *The Eclipse* appeared on 4 October 1824 and the last on 7 January 1825. Mudie is named as its publisher and printer.

<sup>320</sup> *The Eclipse*, 4 October 1824.

Financially speaking, Mudie was better off now than he would be at any other time in his life. In later years he wrote that he had been “in daily confidential intercourse with Mr Canning, Mr Rothschild, and some of the principal men in the City of London” and that he “had the opportunity of rapidly gaining a very large fortune”.<sup>321</sup> Even allowing for the possibility that Mudie was talking up his own prospects, he does appear to have amassed “about £1,000 worth of property”, all of which he was to lose during his brief involvement with the ill-fated Owenite community at Orbiston, near Motherwell in Lanarkshire.<sup>322</sup>

The starting point for what became the Orbiston community was the publication of Owen’s *Report to the County of Lanark* in 1820, following which Alexander Hamilton, a staunch supporter of Owen and son of the Laird of Dalzell, near Motherwell, offered to lease 660 acres of his father’s estate to Owen in order to construct a village of community. Owen ended up buying the land outright and in 1822 he founded the British and Foreign Philanthropic Society as a fund-raising organisation to pay for the construction of the buildings. This was another committee of the “great and good” and, in similar fashion to that of the Duke of Kent in 1819,<sup>323</sup> it soon folded without achieving its aim. Owen then transferred his energies to his visit to Ireland and subsequent attempt to get parliamentary funding for setting up a community there. Again, he was unsuccessful: a Select Committee of the House of Commons, which included David Ricardo, gave him a hard time when he appeared before them, and their report lambasted his belief that the community should be founded on the basis of complete equality for all members. Owen abandoned the idea of instigating his plan in Britain, sold the Motherwell lands back to Hamilton and in 1825 set sail to America, where he founded a community at New Harmony, Indiana.

Mudie had closely monitored these developments, devoting space in *The Economist* to publicising the proposed “Motherwell Society”, defending Hamilton’s integrity against a criticism from a reader, and praising his character, ardour and understanding of Owen’s plan.<sup>324</sup> However, one senses Mudie’s growing separation from Owen himself. In spite of his being the editor of the main Owenite journal and founder of the first co-operative community, Mudie had been excluded by Owen from the committee of the British and Foreign Philanthropic Society, a snub which

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<sup>321</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> See above, Chapter 4.

<sup>324</sup> *The Economist*, Nos. 25 (14 July 1821), 28 (4 August 1821) and 46 (8 December 1821).

still rankled twenty-five years later.<sup>325</sup> More seriously, he had been exasperated by Owen's performance before the Commons Select Committee: in particular, his insistence upon community of property and inability to refute the arguments of the "soi-disant political economists". Mudie scribbled detailed notes in the margins of his copy of the Committee's report and gave them to Owen, telling him that his "fatal blunders" had made it "impossible for the Committee to do otherwise, upon your own evidence, than to repudiate and reject your Plan".<sup>326</sup> Having spent so long articulating an economic basis of Owenism, he must have felt bitterly frustrated by his leader's refusal to use the arguments.

Owen's disappearance from the scene did not kill the idea of a Motherwell co-operative community. In 1821 Hamilton had helped to form the Edinburgh Practical Society along similar lines to Mudie's Co-operative and Economical Society, opening its own school and co-operative store.<sup>327</sup> One of his co-founders was Abram Combe, an Edinburgh tanner, who was to become the leader of the Orbiston community.<sup>328</sup> Combe, like Mudie, was an alumnus of Edinburgh High School. He had first met Owen in 1820 and, as with Mudie, his conversion to Owen's ideas was almost instantaneous. After the Edinburgh Practical Society had collapsed in 1822, due to embezzlement of funds by the store-keeper, Combe set up a short-lived community with his employees at his tannery and became a prolific Owenite pamphleteer. By 1824 Combe and Hamilton were determined to press ahead with the Motherwell project, with or without Owen's help. Hamilton was prepared to sell another, smaller, part of his father's estate, at Orbiston, about a mile away from the land which Owen was now selling back to him, and this was where the community would be set up. Hamilton and Combe decided that the community was not going to rely on the vagaries of philanthropy for its financial backing but would be run on business lines by a joint-stock company, which would buy the land and then lease it to the Orbiston community. In December 1824 they visited London in order to publicise their plan and while they were there they persuaded Mudie to join their enterprise. He closed down *The Eclipse* and

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<sup>325</sup> Letters to R. Owen, 25 and 29 August 1848.

<sup>326</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 29 August 1848.

<sup>327</sup> *The Economist*, No. 47 (15 Dec 1821) contains a letter from the Society, requesting a copy of the Co-operative and Economical Society's Regulations. No. 51 (2 March 1822) reports that the Edinburgh Society now had between 200 and 300 members.

<sup>328</sup> Detailed accounts of Abram Combe and the Orbiston Community are provided in Alex Cullen, *Adventures in Socialism* (1910); Ian Donnachie, *Orbiston: The First British Owenite Community 1825-28*, (*Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, n° 2, Summer 2006), Podmore, op. cit.; Garnett, op. cit. The community's own journal, *The Orbiston Register*, chronicles its activities from November 1825 to September 1827.



moved to Edinburgh at the end of January 1825.<sup>329</sup> Hamilton sold 291 acres to the Orbiston Company, which took possession of the site in March and immediately commenced construction of the buildings, Mudie and Hamilton helping the builders to mark out the site for the foundations.<sup>330</sup>

With three leading Owenites at the helm, Orbiston should have got off to a flying start, but Mudie's involvement was brief and acrimonious, with disastrous financial consequences for himself and his family. Although he had great respect for Hamilton,<sup>331</sup> he appears to have distrusted Combe from the outset. Combe wanted the Orbiston Company to appoint a trustee, who would have full executive power, subject only to the shareholders consenting to his remaining in office. Mudie did not like this idea, preferring a system of democratically elected officers and committees, and accused Combe of wanting to become an "absolute Dictator". Combe publicly denied this, but when Mudie arrived in Edinburgh he was asked to sign a document which appointed him, together with Combe and a third person, John Grant,<sup>332</sup> as co-trustees. Mudie refused to sign, after which relationships became strained. Mudie later said that he had been subjected to "cruel and unjust usage", and

stripped of about £1,000 worth of property which I had taken down with me to Edinburgh; by Mr Hamilton and Mr Combe together; in the course of less than four months, and thrown destitute, with my large family, upon the world!<sup>333</sup>

He wrote a long letter to Hamilton, warning him that Combe's "insane views and proceedings" and "incapacity for management would speedily ruin the enterprise", but Hamilton, who he said was completely dominated by Combe, took no notice and Mudie was effectively forced out.<sup>334</sup>

The subsequent history of Orbiston makes sad reading. Even before the first tenants moved in, the riotous behaviour of the building workers had caused friction with the local residents, who nicknamed the place

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<sup>329</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848. He is known to have still been in London on 27 January as he delivered a lecture on Owenism that day; see *The Morning Post* 28 January 1825.

<sup>330</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848.

<sup>331</sup> He had dedicated the bound copy of *The Economist* Volume II to him, "for his services to the cause, and for his personal virtues and liberality"

<sup>332</sup> Grant was one of the shareholders but did not play a prominent role in the Orbiston community.

<sup>333</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848.

<sup>334</sup> Letters to R. Owen, 14 May 1830 and 25 August 1848. All of these events took place in the first half of 1825. If Mudie's phrase "in the course of less than four months" equates to the duration of his involvement, it can be dated either from January, when he moved to Edinburgh, or March, when the building work commenced. Either way, he was long gone by the time the first tenants occupied the buildings.



“Babylon” and were all too ready to believe any rumour of ungodly behaviour by its members. The main influx of tenants took place in 1826 and the community eventually numbered around 300. Combe accepted anyone who wanted to join, irrespective of whether they had any belief in, or even understanding of, the principles of co-operation.<sup>335</sup> This resulted in some people demanding to be paid wages for their work and others resolving to do as little work as possible; accusations of petty pilfering and fiddling timesheets were to continue throughout the life of the community. To set an example, Combe spent many hours in all weathers digging trenches, during which time he picked up the chest infection which was to cause his death a year later; he became, literally, a martyr to spade husbandry. Eventually the community’s activities were organised as separate businesses, the majority being run along co-operative lines, others more traditionally. Further friction was caused when the majority wanted to introduce full community of property. Combe, who by this time was in declining health, advised caution and the issue was shelved, but a war of words broke out in *The Orbiston Register*, revealing the tensions within the community.<sup>336</sup> Although some of the businesses appeared to be thriving, there were underlying financial problems; Orbiston was not generating enough income to pay its bills and some shareholders, not motivated by philanthropy, were pressing for payment of the interest on their investments. Abram Combe died in August 1827 and within a few weeks of his death the Orbiston Company decided to suspend activities and sell the property. It took three years to find a buyer and in the end the selling price fell far short of the amount required to clear all debts, so the shareholders got nothing. The land was purchased by a neighbour, who had been no friend of the community. She had all the buildings razed to the ground.

Mudie’s vitriolic accounts of his dealings with Combe do not go into detail, so one is left to speculate as to why they could not work together. It may simply have been a clash of two strong egos, each of whom wanted to get his own way. Combe, who had run his own business for twenty years prior to Orbiston, was used to being in charge and after Mudie had refused to join the triumvirate, Combe quickly became the sole trustee. There is nothing in Mudie’s writings to indicate that he wanted to take all the decisions himself. However, his letters to Owen show that he took offence if he felt that he was being under-valued and he was certainly quick to criticise the actions and decisions of others: something to which Owen, and probably Combe as well, did not take kindly.

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<sup>335</sup> *The Orbiston Register*, No. 16 (19 August 1826).

<sup>336</sup> *The Orbiston Register*, Nos. 25, 26, 27 and 28 (27 December 1826 to 14 February 1827).

But it is in their respective interpretations of Owenism where the differences between the two men are most marked. Mudie, in his concentration on economic arguments and the practical issues of day-to-day living, had eschewed what he later referred to as “never-ending metaphysical disquisitions and discussions”.<sup>337</sup> Combe, on the other hand, was attracted to the metaphysical side of Owenism and went so far as to convert from Calvinism to a form of deism, which he called “Divine Revelation”. This he described as

the *facts* and *truths* which the Great Governing Power of the Universe reveals to the senses and to the understanding.<sup>338</sup>

He contrasted this with “the testimony of human imagination”, which he said had no validity as it was not based on fact. Combe linked Divine Revelation directly to Owen’s plan by stating that a core Owenite maxim, “that whatever augments human happiness is good, and whatever diminishes human happiness is evil,” was a self-evident truth.<sup>339</sup> He was so sure of his beliefs that he insisted that the Orbiston community should be called the First Society of Adherents to Divine Revelation, adding that no one who was willing to listen to the evidence in favour of Divine Revelation could possibly continue to hold any other belief.<sup>340</sup> Combe’s proposed name for the community provoked widespread opposition within Orbiston. But Combe believed that all members of the community should hold the same opinions, and if two people held conflicting opinions, one of them must be wrong. The idea of agreeing to differ was unacceptable to him:

We are compelled to believe that the hearts of mankind can be united, only by reconciling their opinions, and that these can be reconciled only by leading them to a knowledge of that Divine standard which comprehends the law of right and wrong, and of truth and error.<sup>341</sup>

He therefore wrote a pamphlet, *The New Court*, which proposed to establish a set of ground rules for the resolution of disputes within the community. The pamphlet dramatises a court case, where the arguments for and against the proposed community title are expressed. The judge makes clear that the only acceptable evidence will be undisputed facts; opinions and prejudices are inadmissible. The cards are stacked against

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<sup>337</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 29 August 1848.

<sup>338</sup> *The Orbiston Register*, No. 1 (10 November 1825).

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.* The paper’s full title was *The Register for the First Society of Adherents to Divine Revelation at Orbiston*.

<sup>341</sup> *The Orbiston Register*, No. 5 (8 December 1825).

the opposition from the start; they are very agitated and all talk at once, after which the judge comments:

Twelve witnesses have already come forward. But what does their evidence prove? Only that their opinions and prejudices are against the title; and this fact was admitted before the trial began. What mind, capable of the least reflection, can possibly rely on such arguments; since it is found that Galileo was able to overcome the most deep-rooted prejudices, and the opinions of the whole world, by a simple statement of facts?<sup>342</sup>

After Combe's own evidence, which is given serenely and at some length, the judge adjourns the case but leaves little doubt as to its final outcome:

The Judge immediately ordered silence. The intellects of these individuals, said he, have been so much disordered that they are not yet capable of distinguishing undisputed facts from unsupported opinions.<sup>343</sup>

*The New Court* reads far more like a sectarian tract than anything written by Mudie or the Spa Fields journeymen printers. Mudie, who printed the pamphlet<sup>344</sup> and would have been fully conversant with its contents, must have realised that his and Combe's respective conceptions of a co-operative community were worlds apart.

Although Combe got his way, opposition to the name rumbled on for many months and in December 1825 Combe wrote a lengthy article in *The Orbiston Register* entitled "On the INTOLERANT NATURE of Prejudice against Divine Revelation", which ended:

we look with pity on the inconsistency of those who cannot sacrifice a groundless and pernicious acquired prejudices, [sic] to lead them *one* step on the road to a general union.<sup>345</sup>

Although the *Advertisement to The Orbiston Register*, which Combe edited from November 1825 until August 1826, was lifted straight from Mudie's *The Economist*, *The Register* provides more evidence of the gulf between

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<sup>342</sup> *The New Court: No. 1 – The Records of the New Court, Established by the First Society of &c. for the Extinction of Disputes*, 22nd March 1825. (Printed by G. Mudie and Co. for the First Society of & c. 1825.)

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> He also printed Combe's blueprint for setting up a company to administer the Orbiston community: *The Sphere for Joint Stock Companies* (Printed by G. Mudie and Co. Edinburgh, 1825).

<sup>345</sup> *The Orbiston Register*, No. 4 (1 December 1825).

them.<sup>346</sup> As well as giving invaluable first-hand accounts of the life of the community, Combe also inserted numerous self-written tracts with titles such as *Unbelief; Natural depravity; Truth and Error; Human Righteousness*; and *The Character of Infidelity*. The subject matter seems more concerned with Divine Revelation than co-operation and the language is, frankly, sanctimonious. Whereas Mudie in *The Economist* had, in the main, resisted the temptation to respond to his readers' letters, Combe could not let anything pass without comment. As he put it:

Divine Revelation has this peculiarity, that it may be applied with advantage to all *writings*; for those that are not profitable for *doctrine*, or for *instruction*, are profitable for *correction*; that is, by *correcting* the errors of others, we learn to avoid them, and thus are materially improved ourselves.<sup>347</sup>

Thus, a local newsagent who had refused to sell *The Orbiston Register* because he disapproved of its content, was subjected to a two-page sermon about how sorry Combe felt for the man's ignorance:

The desire that I feel to have your mind relieved from the bondage of Satan, – that you may enjoy the glorious liberty of the Gospel of Truth, – arises from a clear perception that the condition of ignorance is always painful.<sup>348</sup>

Similarly, a community member who had resigned after making allegations of sharp practices by the storekeeper was told, publicly and at length, why he was wrong to do so:

This is the way you *should have* acted, and you may easily contrast it with the way you *have* acted.<sup>349</sup>

From a twenty-first century secularist perspective, Combe's moralising makes heavy-going reading. However, before being tempted to nod in agreement with Mudie's dismissal of Combe's "insane views", it should be remembered that the readers of 1825 would have been no strangers to that style of writing and, whether or not everyone agreed with the tenets of Divine Revelation, Combe was held in high esteem by his community. Mudie, though, was not the only person to criticise Combe's lack of management skills. John Gray, an economic writer and Orbiston Company shareholder whose ideas were close to Mudie's, had visited the community

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<sup>346</sup> The *Advertisement* consisted of a passage (unattributed) from *The Economist* No. 17. After ill health forced Combe to give up the editorship, it passed to Henry Kirkpatrick and continued until September 1827.

<sup>347</sup> *The Orbiston Register*, No. 5 (8 December 1825).

<sup>348</sup> *The Orbiston Register*, No. 9 (12 January 1826).

<sup>349</sup> *The Orbiston Register*, No. 3 (24 November 1825).

in 1826 and been alarmed by what he saw as a complete absence of management planning. Using similar language to Mudie's, he "saw at once that the scheme would turn out an utter failure".<sup>350</sup> In particular, Combe's well-intentioned, but ill-thought-out, acceptance of anyone into the community, regardless of what skills they possessed, demonstrated "a degree of indifference as to the nature of the occupations that are to be carried on in the establishment, which is greatly inconsistent with the best interests of the society".<sup>351</sup>

But Gray, unlike Mudie, was prepared to pay generous tribute to Combe's character:

His errors, however, were those of judgement, and of judgement only; for, in sincere, ardent, and disinterested disposition *to do good* – to benefit his fellow-creatures, and not this or that man, for the sake of the individual flattery or gratitude it might obtain him in return, but mankind in general – Abram Combe was surpassed by few inhabitants of the globe. Unobtrusive, and as indifferent to the opinion of the world, as to the current of a passing wind, his bodily and mental energies were entirely devoted to the cause in which he had embarked – to the endeavour to promote the happiness of the human race – and the reward he expected was an approving conscience.<sup>352</sup>

By the middle of 1825, Mudie was broke and scratching around to make a living. He joined forces with Stephen Whalley, with whom he had worked on *The Eclipse*, to set up a new paper, *The Manchester Advertiser*, which first appeared on 2 July. They intended that *The Advertiser* would consist solely of advertisements and be distributed free of charge. That same month, unfortunately for Mudie and Whalley, Parliament passed an act which rendered *The Advertiser* and papers like it liable to newspaper stamp duty,<sup>353</sup> so, if it was to survive, *The Advertiser* would have to be re-invented as a full-price newspaper. Mudie and Whalley, together with Mrs Whalley, toured Manchester to look for prospective investors. The only account of this episode is a hostile piece in *The Manchester Courier*, entitled "Hoax", which portrays Mudie and his companions as a gang of con-artists who were making "a barefaced attempt to humbug our fellow townsmen". Those "unfortunate dupes" who had already supplied goods and services to *The Advertiser* were warned that they would not be paid

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<sup>350</sup> J. Gray, *The Social System* (Edinburgh, 1831), Appendix.

<sup>351</sup> J. Gray, *A Word of Advice to the Orbistonians* (Edinburgh, 1826). In *The Economist* Nos. 34 and 35 Mudie had stressed the importance of communities choosing only the most profitable occupations for their members

<sup>352</sup> J. Gray, *The Social System* (Edinburgh, 1831), Appendix.

<sup>353</sup> 6 Geo. IV. C.119. 5 July 1825.

and those who were considering investing were advised “not to trust too much to the flattering prospects and lucrative projects of this trio”. Particularly unpleasant were the snide remarks about Mrs Whalley’s marital status, complete with innuendo of a “ménage à trois”, which stands comparison with anything in modern tabloid journalism:

Whether the lady is a Mrs Mudie or a Mrs Stephen Whaley is difficult to determine; one thing, however, is very probable, that she is the wife of one of the individuals just named. Another wife and children are said to be left at Edinburgh or Glasgow, where, or in London, the whole band are reported to have lived together for nine months.<sup>354</sup>

The article also includes the only known physical description of Mudie:

a stout, active and eloquent man, of considerable address, with very large eyes, spectacles, and a snuff box.<sup>355</sup>

It concludes with a surreal tale of the gang making their escape on a canal boat, Mudie and Whalley jumping ship a few miles outside Liverpool, leaving Mrs Whalley to foot the bill. Doubtless, the good people of Manchester were meant to be grateful to *The Courier* for protecting them from these criminals. In real life, however, *The Manchester Advertiser* continued as a duty-paid newspaper for a further three months, before merging with *The Manchester Mercury*.<sup>356</sup>

Mudie returned to Edinburgh, where he operated a printing business in Horse Wynd, a street where his father had once owned a book shop. One of his contracts was to print *The Edinburgh and Leith Advertiser*, whose owner was the Orbiston shareholder, John Gray.<sup>357</sup> Gray’s understanding of economics, and its importance, matched Mudie’s and, although neither man mentions the other in his writings, it would be surprising if they did not spend many hours in debate and argument.<sup>358</sup> The paper had an almost identical history to that of *The Manchester Advertiser*, starting out as a free paper consisting solely of advertisements, then converting to a duty-paid regular newspaper, which Gray’s brother John edited, and

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<sup>354</sup> *The Manchester Courier*, 27 August 1825. As Mudie had not previously lived in Manchester, the source of the article was probably one of his enemies in Leeds.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>356</sup> *The Leeds Mercury*, 10 December 1825.

<sup>357</sup> *Pigot’s Commercial Directory for Scotland*, 1825-1826: Edinburgh and Leith Advertiser, (Saturday), John Gray, proprietor & publisher, 7 Adam Square; – Geo. Mudie and Co., printers, 25 Horse Wynd.

<sup>358</sup> For accounts of Gray’s economic writings see E. Lowenthal, *The Ricardian Socialists* (New York, 1911) and G. Claey’s, *Machinery, Money and the Millenium*, (Princeton University Press, 1987); also Chapter 6, above.

ceasing after fifty-three issues.<sup>359</sup>

Although his Orbiston experience had reduced him to “dire poverty”, Mudie’s “zeal in the cause of co-operation was unabated”.<sup>360</sup> He delivered a series of talks to trade societies and general public meetings in Edinburgh and would have liked to take his lectures around the country. However, he was in no position to pay for a national tour and felt unable to ask the trade societies to fund him, “lest they should turn from me as a mere needy adventurer seeking only his own imolument or aggrandizement”.<sup>361</sup> He therefore confined his activities to Edinburgh and Leith, where in 1826 he set up another co-operative society, the United Interests Society for the Mutual Support of the Members During Sickness and Old Age: and their Permanent Employment. At the end of that year, he commenced publishing another journal, *The Advocate of the Working Classes*.<sup>362</sup>

*The Advocate* continued in the same vein as *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*: Ricardo and Cobbett were attacked in a similar manner to that in Mudie’s earlier publications and he repeated his assertion that labourers were entitled to enjoy all the fruits of their own labour. But his criticism of Malthus’s population theory had sharpened. Malthus had seen that the poor did not get enough to eat and had thought that this was the result of a natural law to regulate population. However, Mudie argued, the true cause was not a natural law but the result of capitalists’ restraining production in order to maximise their profits:

It was owing to his ignorance of this restraining principle, and to his belief, on the contrary, of a “regulating” principle, that Mr. Malthus constructed his theory of population on the assumption that “population always presses upon the means of subsistence”. He saw that the production of food is always less than the full and comfortable maintenance of the population of the globe requires; and as he imagined that the “regulating” principles always cause the utmost possible quantity of food to be produced, he naturally came to the conclusion that human beings have a tendency to increase faster than the means can be increased for subsisting them. Let the restraint upon production, however, be removed by Practical Political Economy, and Mr. Malthus will soon see that the means of subsistence can be produced to a wasteful excess; and indeed every farmers’ labourer will tell him, that the labour of one

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<sup>359</sup> J. Gray, *The Social System* (Edinburgh, 1831).

<sup>360</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.* I have relied partly on the writings of Professor Claeys for this section, as the microfilmed copy of *The Advocate*, which he deposited in Goldsmith’s Library, University of London, is no longer available. Mudie, however, also quoted parts of *The Advocate* in a later work, *The Book of Murder*, (see below, Chapter 9.)



man is sufficient to produce the subsistence of twenty men; and that many ages must therefore elapse before Great Britain can become overcrowded with inhabitants.<sup>363</sup>

Mudie's attitude towards class relationships had also changed. In *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist* he had argued that the productive classes (by which he meant skilled labourers) only retained one-fifteenth part of the wealth which they had produced. In *The Advocate of the Working Classes* he now suggested that landowners were also part of the *productive classes*, and proposed an alliance between them and the labourers. His rationale for this strategy was that labourers and landowners were "reciprocally serviceable to each other" and that both were under threat from "the active capitalists and unproductive consumers, who constitute a *consuming* power which already devours nearly all the products of labour". In order to survive they needed to "adopt effectual measures for securing to themselves the new treasures which are attainable from the unemployed land and labour of the country". He implied that the alliance would not be permanent; when the labourers were in a position to retain all the fruits of their own labour the rest would have either to "depend on the bounty of the skilled labourers, or to become Skilled Labourers themselves, in their turn".<sup>364</sup>

If there was some ambiguity in Mudie's thinking about landowners, he was much more trenchant about capitalists. Like other Owenites, he had previously directed his economic criticisms towards capital as a system;<sup>365</sup> in *The Advocate*, however, Mudie attacked capitalists as a class, one of the first writers to do so,<sup>366</sup> and argued that their interests and those of the working classes were diametrically opposed. But his solution was reformist, not revolutionary; he was a co-operator, not a proto-Marxist:

The Capitalists, so long as they alone possess the power of controlling the application of human labour, will take care that a sufficiency is not produced for supplying the wants of the Working Classes. Indeed it is impossible for them to suffer a sufficiency for that purpose to be produced without entailing ruin upon themselves. The Working Classes, therefore, now distinctly see that it is impossible for them to be supplied with a sufficiency of the necessities or comforts of life, under the regime of the Capitalists and that their future

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<sup>363</sup> *The Advocate of the Working Classes*, quoted in Anon., *The Book of Murder* (1839).

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, quoted in G. Claeys, op. cit.

<sup>365</sup> "... if capital in the abstract was condemned for its exploitative activities, those who owned it seldom received the same acerbic treatment in the co-operative press." Noel W. Thompson, *The People's Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 123

<sup>366</sup> Charles Hall, op. cit., had made a similar point, but referred only to "the rich" and directed his attacks predominantly towards landowners; see above, Chapter 4.



well-being can only be promoted by legislative enactments, wisely devised upon true principles of Political Economy, for that purpose, or by the Working Classes themselves adopting efficient measures for acquiring a control, or some degree of control, over the application of their own labour.<sup>367</sup>

In the same way that *The Economist* had chronicled the Co-operative and Economical Society, so *The Advocate* reported the progress of the United Interests Society, how it was intended to be no “mere victualling society”, but would slowly accumulate capital for the working classes through its store and by facilitating the exchange of its members’ products; how it moved from Rose Street to larger premises in Hanover Street; how its membership increased to over 500 in early 1827; how its co-operative store and bakery generated a turnover of £100 per week; and how Mudie warned that its funds were insufficient to purchase even a week’s supply of provisions.<sup>368</sup> His warning proved prescient: the United Interests Society collapsed later that year, following mismanagement of the store. Mudie had been unable to intervene as he had been “suddenly attacked with an illness which nearly terminated in death”. Nothing more is known about the nature or length of Mudie’s incapacity, but it lasted long enough to cause his family to go into debt, a situation which, unsurprisingly in view of his history, he found humiliating:

My illness caused my extreme poverty to be discovered; for my family were obliged to contract a debt of about £3 to the store for a few of the necessaries of life.<sup>369</sup>

*The Advocate* had ceased publication in April 1827, shortly before he fell ill.<sup>370</sup> It had been run on a shoestring and Mudie later admitted to Owen that its distribution had been confined to Edinburgh as he had not been able to afford to advertise it anywhere else. The working classes, he wryly observed, were not very good at putting their hands in their pockets, “even for pence”, and sales had been insufficient to cover the cost of printing paper.<sup>371</sup>

When Mudie had recovered from illness he threw himself into whatever

<sup>367</sup> *The Advocate of the Working Classes*, quoted in Anon., *The Book of Murder* (1839).

<sup>368</sup> G. Claeys, George Mudie’s *The Advocate of the Working Classes, 1826-7* (*Labour History Review Spring 1982, Issue 44*). Ironically, the only independent reference to the United Interests Society that has come to light concerns a law suit for an unpaid victualling bill (National Archives of Scotland: Ref. CS228/A/9/47)!

<sup>369</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid. Mudie dates his illness as April 1826, but also says that *The Advocate* had already ceased publication; so 1827 is the more likely date

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

printing or journalistic work he could find to earn money. In early 1829 he began publishing a daily chronicle of cases brought before the local magistrates, price one half-penny. This was the kind of journalism that Mudie had been brought up on and he attracted a regular readership, one of whom fondly remembered the publication thirty years later:

Mudie was engaged in writing and publishing *The Daily Police Reports*, of which I daresay, some of your readers will remember as having enjoyed many a laugh at the humorous manner in which the cases were reported.<sup>372</sup>

Another, later, writer took a different view, criticising the quality of the paper that it was printed on and condemning the public's "sordid interest" in such cases.<sup>373</sup>

The paper sold well: Mudie said that it "yielded a profit of some ten or twelve pounds per week for about three years".<sup>374</sup> He enclosed its latest edition in a letter that he wrote to Owen in May 1830, providing a good example of his reporting style:

Christian Sheriff, an old woman with a tattered grey cloak hanging around her, was convicted of having been drunk and disorderly, and uttering obscene and wicked language, in the High Street, yesterday. On the Magistrate sentencing the defender to the sobering punishment of three days confinement in the Police Office, "Oo aye," said she, laughing, and with a look of the most callous indifference. "I'll stay wi ye, just as lang as ye like!"<sup>375</sup>

Mudie's reason for writing to Owen had nothing to do with the *Police Reports*. The local press had reported the opening of a new infant school, whose pupils, including Mudie's two youngest children, had given a demonstration of their prowess to local dignitaries. The reports had claimed that the concept of infant education had been formulated by a Mr Samuel Wilderspin and Mudie wanted to set the record straight on Owen's behalf. He had not done so earlier, he said, in case Owen's controversial reputation damaged support for the schools:

The vanity and egotism of Mr Wilderspin, who has contrived to make the public believe that he is the founder of Infant Schools, and the sole inventor of all the arrangements, and discoverer of the principles on which they are constructed, have luckily conduced to lead the public mind so far on the course which you have prepared for it without the formidable impediments which

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<sup>372</sup> Letter from "W. G." to *The Ladies Journal*, 14 May 1859

<sup>373</sup> J. Bulloch (Editor), *Scottish Notes and Queries*, June 1905 p. 181

<sup>374</sup> G. Mudie, 2nd letter to W. and R. Chambers, 12 September 1840.

<sup>375</sup> *Police Reports: being Reports of the Interesting Proceedings in the Police Court*, 5 May 1830.

otherwise would have been thrown in the way, by the outcries which would have been raised against the Infant School System, had it been known that it proceeded directly from you.<sup>376</sup>

Mudie had inserted his own comments on the subject in the *Police Reports*, hence his sending a copy to Owen, and urged Owen to pursue the issue in the London press. This was not simply a matter of massaging Owen's ego; infant education was an integral part of Owen's plan and its success, Mudie suggested, would pay political dividends:

the public must be astonished to find that they have, unwittingly, carried into practical effect one half of your magnificent project, – and that half the more difficult and doubtful moiety, – viz. the universal and successful establishment of Institutions for the Formation of Character!<sup>377</sup>

The letter shows Mudie to be firing on all cylinders; “calamity has had the effect of rendering me much more industrious”.<sup>378</sup> In addition to writing the *Police Reports*, which he described as “a make-shift”, he was planning a new periodical on “Practical Political Economy” and asked Owen's advice about distributing it through the network of co-operative societies. He had also invented a printing machine which was, he said, far cheaper and quicker to use than the existing steam-driven presses. He claimed that even with his poorly-made prototype four boys could run off 1,500 copies in one hour, but if he had a perfectly made one its output could be doubled; and to achieve this he would need capital of £100 or £150. Probably remembering his earlier business disasters, Mudie was wary of advertising for a partner in case someone stole his design and started to manufacture on his own account, so he asked if Owen knew anyone who might be interested.<sup>379</sup>

It is not known for how long the *Police Reports* continued, but in September 1831 Mudie and his brother William became partners in a new weekly publication, *The Edinburgh Cornucopia*, with Mudie's son Forbes acting as publisher for the later editions.<sup>380</sup> *The Cornucopia*, which changed its name to *The Cornucopia Britannica* after nine issues, was set up to meet a growing demand for cheap literature. Traditionally, the rural

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<sup>376</sup> G. Mudie, Letter to R. Owen, 14 May 1830.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Owen's response is not known, but there is no evidence that Mudie was able to fund the manufacture of his printing press.

<sup>380</sup> *The Waterloo Directory of Scottish Newspapers and Periodicals, 1800-1900*, Vol. 1. See also, G. Claeys, *Further Journalistic Efforts of George Mudie: The Edinburgh Cornucopia and The Alarm Bell, 1831-38* (Bulletin; SSLH, Vol. 51 No 3 1986)

and urban poor had been provided with lurid and bawdy verses, tales and folk-lore through the medium of broadside ballads, chapbooks and almanacs. By the 1830s, however, some sections of the working classes were more literate than their forefathers and had a thirst for knowledge which could not be met by traditional means. Daily newspapers, costing seven pence because of the heavy stamp duty, were beyond the pockets of most people, but if a periodical consisted entirely of excerpts from books, poetry, educational articles and witticisms it could avoid the duty and reach out to an audience who were ready to be instructed as well as amused.<sup>381</sup> Mudie's introduction to the first issue captures the optimism of the times:

The rapid progression in and universal diffusion of knowledge are the most striking characteristics of the age in which we live. Every succeeding year, therefore, will bring a renewal of the noble fruits arising from the careful culture of the mental powers.<sup>382</sup>

*The Cornucopia* was not the first of its kind but, by common consent, during its existence it was the best.<sup>383</sup> Its content was primarily literary, featuring fiction, poetry, biography and reviews, but Mudie also wrote about history, commenced a series of French lessons and gradually introduced articles on economics along the lines of *The Advocate of the Working Classes*.<sup>384</sup> Although aiming at a wide audience he made few concessions to his readers' levels of knowledge. One satirical poem, *The complaint, No. 2; or, further reasons why the wages of the writers' clerks and apprentices should be increased*, required the reader to understand numerous legal phrases in Latin<sup>385</sup>; and in a review of *Parisian Phraseology* by Louis Philippe R. Fenwick de Porquet, Mudie commented breezily that:

Upon this matter then we fancy we feel ourselves at home, we venture unhesitatingly to pronounce, that M. de Porquet's system is incomparably the best

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<sup>381</sup> For a full account see Scott A. McLean, *Cleansing the Hawker's Basket: Popular Literature and the Cheap Periodical Press in Scotland* (Studies in Scottish Literature, Vol. 32 Issue 1, 1 January 2001).

<sup>382</sup> *The Edinburgh Cornucopia* No. 1, quoted in Mudie's 1st Letter to Messrs. William and Robert Chambers, published in *Cleave's Penny Gazette of Variety and Amusement*, 5 September 1840.

<sup>383</sup> "The forerunner and best of these was styled *The Cornucopia*" – *Memoir of Robert Chambers with Autobiographical Reminiscences of William Chambers* (1872); "a decided advance on all predecessors" – Letter from "E. F." to the *Ladies Journal*, 28 May 1859; "the best of which was a 1½d. weekly broadside called *The Cornucopia*, started by one Mudie" – H. J. Nicoll, *Great movements, and those who achieved them* (1881).

<sup>384</sup> H. J. Nicoll, op. cit.; G. Claeys, op. cit

<sup>385</sup> *The Cornucopia Britannica*, 21 January 1832; reprinted in J. Maidment, *The Court of Session Garland* (1839).

that has ever come under our observation, and that it bears upon the face of it evidence of its being the most efficacious and successful instrument for accomplishing the desired end; and consequently for rapidly enabling the pupil to write and speak French or Italian or any other language with fluency and accuracy.<sup>386</sup>

Possibly, as Claeys suggests, some readers and advertisers were put off by attacks on orthodox political economy, or perhaps the paper was simply under-capitalised, but by early 1832 the creditors were once more knocking at Mudie's door and, to avoid being sent to the debtors' prison, he claimed sanctuary on 18 January within the grounds of the former Abbey at Holyroodhouse.<sup>387</sup> *The Cornucopia* struggled on for a few more weeks but ceased publication in March, falling victim to a new and better funded competitor, *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, which quickly came to dominate the market.<sup>388</sup> Mudie fled to London with the intention of resuming his Owenite activities;<sup>389</sup> but soon found out that the co-operative movement had changed during his seven-year absence.

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<sup>386</sup> *The Cornucopia Britannica*, 19 November 1831.

<sup>387</sup> *Scottish Book Trade Index*, National Library of Scotland. There was a long-established right to sanctuary for debtors within the Abbey grounds, adjacent to the Palace of Holyroodhouse.

<sup>388</sup> *Memoir of Robert Chambers, with Autobiographical Reminiscences of William Chambers* (1872). See below, Chapter 10.

<sup>389</sup> "The enterprise involved me in utter ruin, and even compelled me to flee from my native city". G. Mudie, 1st Letter to Messrs. William and Robert Chambers (5 September 1840).

## The break with Owen

*I therefore held myself aloof, – determined to  
promote the cause of co-operation as much as in  
me lay, by my own efforts*<sup>390</sup>

From this point onwards Mudie's career becomes harder to trace: one short-lived publication, two or three pamphlets, two newspaper letters, two more to Owen and an English grammar textbook are all that survive of his written works<sup>391</sup> and references to him in print are few and far between. The diversity of the subject matter does not suggest a common thread to his writings. However, by tracing the development of the co-operative movement during the 1820s and 1830s it is possible to get a clearer, albeit speculative, idea of Mudie's contribution to it.<sup>392</sup>

In the early 1820s the combination of an improved economy, good harvests and repressive legislation had ensured that the mass rioting which had marked the immediate post-war years was in decline. Following the Peterloo Massacre, when a large but peaceful demonstration had been attacked by troops, resulting in fifteen deaths, Parliament passed the "Six Acts",<sup>393</sup> which, in effect, outlawed mass political dissent. Radicalism lost momentum: many of its reformist leaders were imprisoned, while most of the leaders of its revolutionary wing, the Spenceans, were executed or transported after the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820. The best-known and most consistent radical voices throughout the 1820s were Carlile's *Republican*, which continued to be a thorn in the side of the establishment even while its owner was in prison for six years, and Cobbett's *Political Register*; but there was little organised political activity.

The co-operative movement, however, thrived, in spite of the setbacks

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<sup>390</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848.

<sup>391</sup> *The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars* (September to November 1832); *The Book of Murder and The Alarm Bell* (1838 / 39), both anonymous and not universally accepted as being written by Mudie – see Chapter 9; open letters to W. and R. Chambers (September 1840); *The Grammar of the English Language truly made Easy and Amusing by the Invention of Three Hundred Moveable Parts of Speech* (1840); letters to R. Owen (25 and 29 August 1848); *A Solution of the Portentous Enigma of Modern Civilization* (1849).

<sup>392</sup> This is a very brief summary. For fuller accounts see E. P. Thompson, op. cit.; G. Claeys, op. cit.; Iorwerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London* (Wm. Dawson & Son, Ltd, 1979).

<sup>393</sup> Training Prevention Act; Seizure of Arms Act; Seditious Meetings Act; Blasphemous and Seditious Libels Act; Misdemeanours Act; Newspaper Stamp Duties Act.

at Spa Fields and Orbiston. In 1824, a year after the ending of the Spa Fields community, the London Co-operative Society (LCS) was founded, with the aim, initially, of increasing support for the principles of co-operation, although it later set itself the goal of forming a community within fifty miles of London.<sup>394</sup> Its journal, *The Co-operative Magazine*, became the main focal point of the co-operative movement, reporting developments in Orbiston, Owen's community at New Harmony, Indiana and other societies which were springing up around the UK.

Although *The Co-operative Magazine* acknowledged the importance of Robert Owen, it distanced itself from his personal views and denied that it was Owenite. It challenged the central tenet of Owenism, that a person's character is made for, not by, them; and argued that such a belief was not necessary in order to become a good member of a co-operative community.<sup>395</sup> It attacked Owen's egotistical behaviour ("always setting himself up as the author, the very Alpha and Omega of the System") and "religio-phobia". The polemic was so strongly worded that the magazine was forced to apologise for its intemperate language following complaints from readers.<sup>396</sup>

One aspect of Owen's campaign, however, which both the LCS and *The Co-operative Magazine* fully supported was his courting of the rich and powerful. Had he concentrated his efforts on the working classes, they thought, he would have alarmed the aristocracy into opposing his cause.<sup>397</sup> The Society's planned community was large-scale, requiring a budget of £200,000, and it looked to wealthy philanthropists to fund it. The magazine's content reflected this strategy, adopting the genteel tone of some of the letters to *The Economist* and preferring discussions about the nature of happiness to political economy.<sup>398</sup> Ironically, one of its few economic references was a passage from *The Economist* in which Mudie had analysed the layers of profit that made up the price of a loaf of bread; although neither Mudie nor Spa Fields were mentioned by name.<sup>399</sup> Towards the end of 1826, some members of the Society became frustrated

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<sup>394</sup> *The Co-operative Magazine*, Vol.1 No. 2 (February 1826) pp. 54–59.

<sup>395</sup> *The Co-operative Magazine*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (January 1827) p. 16

<sup>396</sup> *The Co-operative Magazine*, Vol. 2 No. 12 (December 1827) pp. 533-534; Vol. 3 No. 1 (January 1828) pp. 17-19.

<sup>397</sup> *The Co-operative Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (February 1826) p. 55.

<sup>398</sup> "It will be necessary to define happiness, and show what it consists in; as it is the central point of our system, the grand pivot on which it turns." *The Co-operative Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (January 1826) p. 5.

<sup>399</sup> *The Co-operative Magazine*, Vol. 3 No. 8 (April 1829) pp.179-180, quoting from *The Economist* No. 20.



with the lack of progress of a project which they considered to be unnecessarily grandiose. They set up the Co-operative Community Fund Association (CCFA) to finance a small-scale community of between 50 and 100 working-class people and bluntly told *The Co-operative Magazine* that its attempts to win over the rich and its love of “discussion of abstruse points of philosophy” had “retarded rather than advanced” the progress of co-operation.<sup>400</sup>

As the journeymen printers had done in 1821, but the LCS had not, the CCFA supplemented its members’ subscriptions by opening a trading store. Societies in Brighton quickly followed suit and two new stores were opened. One of the Brighton members, Dr William King, edited a magazine, *The Co-operator*, which included a handbook on how to set up a co-operative society and run a trading store. Although King was a middle-class son of a clergyman, he made it very clear who his target audience was:

Co-operation is a subject entirely for the working classes. The rich have nothing to do with it.<sup>401</sup>

He explained his vision of co-operation as a natural extension of institutions with which working-class readers would be familiar, such as trade unions and benefit clubs, and, as a result, numerous small-scale, trading-based co-operative societies sprang up.<sup>402</sup> Many of them looked to the London-based CCFA for theoretical and practical advice and to meet this demand the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge (BAPCK) was founded in 1829, as the educational and propagandist wing of the co-operative movement. As Mudie had done in London and Edinburgh, BAPCK sent speakers to meetings and wrote pamphlets and newspaper articles extolling the benefits of co-operation to a primarily artisan working-class audience.

This audience included radicals, steeped in the tradition of political action, but whose economic analysis looked no further than lowering the taxes that supported “Old Corruption” and who viewed with suspicion the communitarian aims of Owenism. It also included trade unionists, driven underground by the Combination Act of 1799, legalised again following its repeal in 1824 and now engaged in bitter struggle with employers as the economic boom of the early 1820s gave way to long and deep recession. Not all trade unionists were radicals and vice versa, but many from both

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<sup>400</sup> *The Co-operative Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 10 (October 1826) pp. 308-314; Vol. 2 No. 1 (January 1827) pp. 25-27.

<sup>401</sup> *The Co-operator*, No. 2 (1 June 1828) p. 4.

<sup>402</sup> By the time *The Co-operator* ceased publication in August 1830 the number of co-operative societies had risen to 300



camps responded positively to those co-operators, such as BAPCK and Dr King, who concentrated on practical measures to protect and improve the standard of living of working-class people. BAPCK's committee included John Gast, a life-long trade unionist and leader of the Thames shipwrights; James Watson, a close associate of Richard Carlile; and Allen Davenport, a Spencean. Such men saw no contradiction between campaigning for universal suffrage, taking strike action to prevent wage cuts and setting up a co-operative store to raise funds and employ members who were out of work. But these activities were not part of Owen's plan, whose author and followers regarded parliamentary reform as completely irrelevant and industrial action as doomed to failure. The Owenite advice for working-class people was to forget strikes and put all their resources into raising funds to set up a co-operative community. Nor did Owen approve of societies based on the Brighton model of Dr King, dismissing them as mere "trading associations".<sup>403</sup> However, while Owen was much admired personally, many co-operators were disinclined to follow all his dictats. It was not so much a case of working-class people becoming converts to co-operation, but of incorporating it into their social and political activities.

Between 1830 and 1832 the issue of parliamentary reform dominated the political agenda. The Whig government under Earl Grey had committed itself to abolishing some of the "rotten boroughs" and extending the franchise to more of the middle classes. Their first Reform Bill was killed off in committee stage, so the government asked the king to dissolve Parliament and the subsequent election resulted in a landslide victory for the Whigs. The second Bill cleared the Commons but was thrown out by the Tory-dominated House of Lords. The third Reform Bill reached the Lords in March 1832 and Earl Grey threatened to ask the King to swamp the Lords with new Whig peers if they continued to obstruct it. The king refused, the government resigned and the Tory Duke of Wellington, who was wholly opposed to any reform whatsoever, became prime minister. But Wellington did not have sufficient parliamentary support to form a government. He resigned after less than two weeks, the Lords gave in and the Reform Bill became law in June.

Throughout this period there was massive civil unrest: political unions, comprising both middle and working-class supporters of reform, sprang up across the country and acted as the local co-ordinators of the reform campaign; the various setbacks to the Bill's passage were marked by riots and there was even an armed insurrection at Merthyr Tydfil in 1831. Many leading BAPCK members became heavily involved in political agitation; addressing public meetings and publishing their own radical

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<sup>403</sup> W. Lovett, *Life and Struggles of William Lovett* (1876), p. 44.

newspapers. In doing so they challenged the state's power over the press and started a battle that was to last for six years.<sup>404</sup> It was all right for a cheap co-operative magazine, such as *The Economist* or *The Co-operator*, to extol the virtues of co-operation and even to argue with orthodox political economy, but if it focused on political corruption and championed universal suffrage it became liable to stamp duty, thus pricing it out of the reach of the very audience that it was aimed at.

The first challenger was William Carpenter, BAPCK member and editor of the *Weekly Free Press*, a stamped newspaper which devoted space to publicising BAPCK correspondence. In 1830 Carpenter started his unstamped *Political Letters*, hoping to avoid prosecution by giving each edition a different title (*Letter to the Duke of Wellington; A Political Letter*; etc.). His strategy failed and Carpenter was sentenced to six months' imprisonment in May 1831. Two other BAPCK activists, Henry Hetherington, who had been one of the signatories of the *Report of the Journey-men Printers* in 1821, and John Cleave, became major figures in the "war of the unstamped". Mudie was to become associated with both men at various times over the next fifteen years.

A BAPCK advertisement in Carpenter's paper at the end of 1830 provides a good example of how it synthesised Owenite economics with radical politics. Its economic section could have been written by Mudie:

But how, we ask, can pauperism, degradation, and suffering, be the consequences of an EXCESS of labour, as compared with the demand for it? An excess of labour, in a national point of view, is more than is necessary for raising food and providing comforts for the whole population: – and as that is all that is demanded, how can there be any excess? The people do not desire to work more than is necessary to supply themselves with the means of subsistence; and if the working people could obtain a sufficiency of the necessaries of life, by working only three hours a day, why should they work six, nine or twelve hours a day?<sup>405</sup>

Its views on land ownership might have come from the Spenceans, or even the Diggers of 1649:

The land belongs equally to all the inhabitants; – surely it is as much our property as it is the property of the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, or even of the usurping and monopolizing landowners themselves; because

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<sup>404</sup> See also below, Chapter 9. For a detailed study of the "war of the unstamped" see Patricia Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>405</sup> W. Carpenter, *Letter to Mr Wilmot Horton* (31 Dec 1830), p. 16. In *Facts and Observations Connected with the Present Time* (18 November 1830) Carpenter reprinted Mudie's first essay from *The Economist* No. 1.

all animated existence is equally entitled to the produce of the earth, and to what it can be made to produce, especially those who labour to increase its productions. No individual, or class of individuals, can become entitled to its exclusive possession, otherwise than by force or fraud – bad title deeds, which length of possession cannot make valid.<sup>406</sup>

But BAPCK soon got into financial difficulties<sup>407</sup> and became moribund, its final act being to set up a defence fund for William Carpenter's trial. Some of its leading lights, including Hetherington, Cleave, and William Lovett, who was to become an important figure in Chartism, jumped ship to join the newly formed National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC) in April 1831.

Whereas BAPCK had been a co-operative association that reached out to radicals and trade unionists, NUWC was a radical working-class organisation, some of whose leaders happened to be co-operators. Its constitution included a mixture of Owenite economics, support for trade unions and demands for parliamentary reform which pre-echoed those of Chartism:

To avail itself of every opportunity in the progress of society, for the securing for every working man the full value of his labour and the free disposal of the produce of his labour.

To protect working men against the tyranny of masters and manufacturers by all just means as circumstances may determine.

To obtain for the nation an effectual reform of the Commons House of the British Parliament: annual parliaments, extension of the suffrage to every adult male, vote by ballot, and especially no property qualification for Members of Parliament.<sup>408</sup>

The NUWC had no illusions that the Reform Bill would deliver universal suffrage, but the prevalent view was that mass public action would create an unstoppable momentum for more radical reform. This was anathema to Owen and his followers; NUWC co-operators who attended the co-operative congress in April 1832 were attacked by an Owenite delegate (although the Reform Bill itself was not mentioned):

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid

<sup>407</sup> W. Carpenter, *A Political Register* (28 Jan 1831), Letter from 3rd Leicester Co-operative Society noting that BAPCK's funds are insufficient to meet its expenditure.

<sup>408</sup> *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 27 May 1831

## The Hidden Oak

Let me now beseech the radicals to cease from exciting the lower orders against the higher; and all who are present at this meeting, to be quiet, peaceable and united.<sup>409</sup>

In spite of several attempts over the years to find common ground, the Owenites and radicals would remain opposed to each other. An editorial in *The Poor Man's Guardian* summed up the position in 1832:

Above all, let the RADICAL take the OWENITE by the hand, and the OWENITE do the same by the RADICAL, for both parties are the real, and only real friends of the working people. Let them both bear in mind, that if “the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church”, so is the blood of the people the seed of the aristocracy. The disciples of Mr Owen may differ from us as to the means, or “modus operandi”, but they have precisely the same eventual object in view, namely, to establish for the workman dominion over the fruits of his own industry. We travel by different roads, but our destination is the same, and if we cannot agree to march together, let us at least throw no obstruction in each other's way.<sup>410</sup>

This, then, was the situation when Mudie returned to London in the summer of 1832. The Reform Bill had become law, but its ten pounds per year property qualification in order to vote completely excluded working-class people from the electorate, and the Whig government made it clear that it had no intention of ever widening the franchise. BAPCK, the organisation closest to Mudie's thinking, was all but defunct. NUWC, suffering from internal splits as disillusion set in, concentrated most of its efforts on supporting the large number of working-class unstamped newspapers which had recently appeared. Owen and his followers, untroubled by the Reform Bill crisis, threw themselves into the labour bazaar project,<sup>411</sup> while proclaiming that the “old immoral world” was coming to an end.

Still loyal to his mentor, Mudie presented himself at Owen's base, the Institute of the Industrious Classes, Gray's Inn Road, and offered his services. But his reception was lukewarm and Mudie decided that in

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<sup>409</sup> *The Crisis*, 28 April 1832. The same delegate (a Mr Hirst) was later hissed at and forced to sit down after suggesting that the government had been right to prosecute William Carpenter for selling an unstamped paper.

<sup>410</sup> *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 22 September 1832.

<sup>411</sup> Useful histories of the labour bazaar experiments can be found in G. J. Holyoake, op. cit.; F. Podmore, op. cit.; J. Harrison, op. cit.; I. Prothero, op. cit.; and G. Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium*. Owen's journal, *The Crisis*, provides first-hand accounts of his own bazaar between April 1832 and August 1834. Mudie's contribution is covered in G. Claeys, op. cit., and *George Mudie and The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars*, (Bulletin – Society for the Study of Labour History, Spring 1981, Issue 42, p31).

future he would promote the cause of co-operation on his own:

My zeal in the cause of co-operation was unabated, though I had been made a martyr to it in Edinburgh. But when I had a private interview with you on the following day, I found that you had surrounded yourself with officials amongst whom I would have been regarded as an unwelcome intruder even by yourself, and that you entertained ideas with which I could not agree; and I therefore held myself aloof, – determined to promote the cause of co-operation as much as in me lay, by my own efforts...<sup>412</sup>

Given Owen's refusal to accept any criticism of his ideas, it is hardly surprising that he should have surrounded himself with assistants more malleable than the sharp-tongued Mudie. This must, however, have been a bitter pill for Mudie to swallow, especially as he had tried to maintain the lines of communication with Owen while he was living in Edinburgh. He was still active in the co-operative movement and had just been appointed to its Edinburgh district council.<sup>413</sup> But he may have realised that there were by now large numbers of very able and knowledgeable co-operators, both Owenite and non-Owenite, and that he was no longer a big fish in a small pond.

Undeterred by Owen's rejection, Mudie threw himself into the project that was currently dominating the minds of all co-operators: exchange bazaars, or equitable labour exchanges. These were the co-operative movement's attempt to implement the labour theory of value, which Owen had first mooted in his *Report to the County of Lanark* in 1820, and were intended to enable co-operative societies to exchange surplus products without recourse to middlemen or money. The currency of an exchange bazaar was the labour note: a depositor would have his item valued by the bazaar in terms of the cost of materials plus the number of hours' labour it had taken to make the item and he would be given a labour note, expressed in hours, which he could then exchange for other items deposited in the bazaar. A commission would be charged to depositors in order to cover the running costs of the bazaar.

Owen's community at New Harmony had operated a bazaar in 1827 and, in England, a small number of co-operative societies followed suit over the next few years. William King of the Union Exchange Society opened one the following year at the premises of the London Co-operative Society,<sup>414</sup> but this operated more along the lines of barter and did not use labour notes. BAPCK ran a bazaar at Red Lion Square from

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<sup>412</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848.

<sup>413</sup> *Proceedings of the third Co-operative congress: held in London 23 April 1832*, pp. 61 and 82.

<sup>414</sup> *The Co-operative Magazine* December 1827. King was no relation to Dr. King of Brighton.

late 1829 onwards<sup>415</sup> and King suggested that they adopt labour notes, but they chose not to do so. The first bazaar to use labour notes was the First Western Union Exchange Bank in February 1832,<sup>416</sup> whose leader, Benjamin Warden, was a BAPCK member and one of the founders on the NUWC. The North Western Association of the Useful Classes, led by William King, did likewise in April at Gothic Hall, Marylebone.<sup>417</sup> In August the Central Co-operative Association, whose most prominent member, William Benbow, was one of the most militant of the NUWC leaders, started a bazaar in Red Lion Square.<sup>418</sup> Finally, Owen opened his own, the National Equitable Labour Exchange, at Grays' Inn Road in September.<sup>419</sup>

Mudie joined in the flurry of activity, delivering a lecture on the "Principles and Formation of the Exchange Bazaars" at the Institute of the Working Classes, Theobalds Road;<sup>420</sup> at that time, headquarters of both the Central Co-operative Association and the NUWC.<sup>421</sup> He also started a new weekly journal, *The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars*. In its first edition Mudie demonstrated, with the aid of an engraving, how the working classes supported all other classes and claimed that they would be able to increase their wealth more than fourfold, without threatening either the government or the wealthy. This was based heavily on Mudie's earlier writings; in fact, he admitted that it was nearly a transcript from *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*. Perhaps still smarting from Owen's rebuff, Mudie seems to have felt the need to restate his co-operative credentials: that he had founded the first co-operative society, that he had edited three co-operative journals and that he had successfully addressed numerous public meetings on the subject. This included a meeting, at Gothic Hall in Marylebone, of William King's Association of the Exchange Bazaar, which had resolved to give his publication financial support.<sup>422</sup>

In *The Gazette*, rather than developing his economic ideas, Mudie confined himself to discussion of the theory of exchange bazaars and

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<sup>415</sup> *The Co-operator*, December 1829 et seq.

<sup>416</sup> *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 10 Mar 1832.

<sup>417</sup> *The Crisis*, 28 April 1832.

<sup>418</sup> *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 11 August 1832.

<sup>419</sup> *The Crisis*, 8 September 1832.

<sup>420</sup> *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 29 September 1832.

<sup>421</sup> I. Prothero, op. cit., p 245 and 290.

<sup>422</sup> *The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars and Practical Guide to the rapid establishment of the public prosperity, by presenting a new certain and unlimited Market for the productions of Industry and Capital*, No. 1 (22 September 1832).

reports of meetings of bazaar society members. Possibly in acknowledgement of its patronage, he included a long article by King on the principles of the Gothic Hall bazaar. The value of labour was to be fixed at sixpence per hour and this would be added to the cost of materials to give a nominal cash value of the goods deposited. A commission of one penny in the shilling would be charged to cover running expenses and the price would then be divided by sixpence to create a labour note expressed in hours.

Gothic Hall attracted praise from various quarters. Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, editor of *The Crisis*, visited the premises in September and wrote:

I was much pleased with it and think it well worthy of imitation and likely to succeed in a business point of view...<sup>423</sup>

Perhaps more surprisingly, the old radical Richard Carlile wrote to the journal *The Isis* praising the Gothic Hall prospectus "which is free from all romance and hyperbolism, and states the subject fairly".<sup>424</sup> Carlile was no fan of Owen and not particularly keen on co-operation, but said that he wanted to see labour exchanges given a fair trial as they might do some good. He was, however, wary of the high claims that Owen and his followers had made for the idea.

Owen's own bazaar was on the grand scale and attracted huge crowds. Its business was so brisk that a backlog of goods awaiting valuation soon developed. But its valuations tended to be on the low side and a tailor wrote to *The Times* (reprinted in *The Crisis*) complaining that the valuation of a coat that he had made was less than the cost of the cloth that he had bought to make it with. Owen's response was patronising: the tailor, he said, should not worry about the low valuation given to him as he would be able to obtain other articles which had been similarly valued. He divided the depositors into three groups, large, medium and small, and suggested that the small depositors lacked commercial acumen, making them uncompetitive in the market place:

Sometimes, in addition, the individuals of the third, or lower class, are not good judges of the materials they use, or do not know how to cut them out to the most advantage; and not a few spoil the materials by their well-intentioned efforts to be industrious, and to do something when out of regular employment to support themselves and families, and thus the finished article

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<sup>423</sup> Robert Dale Owen, *Letters from the Transatlantic*, in *The Free Enquirer*, 8 September, 1832.

<sup>424</sup> *The Isis*, 8 September 1832. Its editor, Eliza Sharples, was a political activist and Carlile's partner.



becomes often of less value in the market than the material before it was cut up to be so misused.<sup>425</sup>

To reduce the number of depositors the same edition of *The Crisis* carried an announcement:

In consequence of business being greatly impeded by small deposits, the Governor and Directors of the above Exchange, give notice, that they will not receive any deposit of less real value than forty hours, or nominal money value of twenty shillings.<sup>426</sup>

It seems clear that Owen was trying to attract a different customer base from that of the other bazaars, which were run mainly by and for working-class co-operative societies and individual artisans. The National Equitable Labour Exchange, however, was courting large manufacturers who could make bulk deposits of goods. Its rate of commission was the same as Gothic Hall's, as was its basis of labour valuation at sixpence per hour, but the price paid to depositors was then adjusted (downwards) so that the bazaar could compete with other markets. In Owen's words, "What regulates our real valuation of articles is the lowest market price out of doors".<sup>427</sup>

The ban on small deposits was not popular and Owen had to defend his actions the following week. He blamed the small depositors for causing the problem by their constant complaints:

The little depositors made all the noise and created all the confusion. They also lay heavier upon our provision store than the larger depositors. They deterred and prevented all larger depositors, who were men of business, from coming near the place.<sup>428</sup>

His pompous advice to them illustrates the gulf between Owen and the people whom exchange bazaars were intended to help:

The only remedy for this disappointment at present, is for parties to put their trifles together into one deposit; send a person with them who is authorised to agree or dissent from our valuation. This will benefit them without injuring us. So great an establishment as ours cannot in our mode of conducting business be supported by little matters.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> *The Crisis*, 13 October 1832.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>427</sup> *The Crisis*, 6 October 1832

<sup>428</sup> *The Crisis*, 20 October 1832.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid*



At this point Mudie entered the lists. In the past, he had expressed any disagreements with Owen either in private or in the mildest of tones, as in some articles in *The Economist*. Now, for the first time in public, he launched a full-blooded polemic against his former mentor:

It can no longer be denied that, whatever the Governor of the Grays' Inn Road Bazaar may imagine to the contrary, his past and present proceedings, and the constitution and practices of the Institution under his management, are very far from being calculated to advance the real and immediate interests of the Working Classes of the people, any more than they are calculated to serve the interests of small Dealers of any kind, or even those of small Master Tradesmen, small Manufacturers or small Capitalists.<sup>430</sup>

It was well known, Mudie argued, that capitalists and owners of machinery possessed great advantages over individual master mechanics, journeymen, farmers and labourers; advantages which were excessive, inordinate and unjust; and that this state of affairs was "a great, a crying, and an increasing evil". The whole point of co-operative societies and exchange bazaars was to counteract this evil, but here was Owen, setting the value of labour so low that the labourers could not even cover their costs, and allowing some bulk quantities of goods to be exchanged at prices which were fixed

not for the benefit of the victims of capital, but for the benefit of capitalists, by whom alone these things can in any quantities be deposited.<sup>431</sup>

In Mudie's view, even the profits from Owen's institution would be of little benefit to the poor. Owen had proposed to place the exchange bazaars under the management of the governors of the poor in each parish. These were, in Mudie's view,

the very men who ... have proved by their public acts that they are as regardless of economy as they are ignorant of the means of enabling honest labour to maintain itself, and to achieve its own independence.<sup>432</sup>

Worse still, Owen had suggested that the profits from bazaars could be given to the government in order to pay off the national debt. Mudie was enraged:

He appears to be willing to confer power upon any body of men except labouring men, and to assign advantages and profits to any parties excepting those

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<sup>430</sup> *The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars*, 20 October 1832.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*

by whose labour alone all advantages and profits are created ... This is really most monstrous.<sup>433</sup>

For Mudie, as it was for other working-class co-operators, it was crucial that labour exchanges should become independent of capitalists. To this end he recommended that the value of labour be fixed at a certain level and not allowed to fall below it, irrespective of market fluctuations. He also suggested that nearly half of the commission charges made by bazaars to depositors should be set aside as an accumulating capital fund “for working out the independence of the depositors”. By inference, those depositors would not have included capitalists.<sup>434</sup>

To be fair to Owen, he genuinely, if naively, believed that, once the “men of business” saw the merits of exchange bazaars, labour notes would replace money as the circulating medium, thus immediately revaluing (upwards) the wealth of labourers; therefore, in order to be convincing, exchange bazaars had to be on the grand scale:

An establishment of this nature cannot flourish merely by the combination of a few trades; to be carried on in perfection, it should present as great a variety as is to be found in the outward market, and when it shall so do, the contributors may bid adieu to poverty and misery.<sup>435</sup>

It is not known whether Owen ever read Mudie’s *Gazette*, but he was certainly aware that other exchange bazaars were operating on different principles to his own and he began what appears to be an orchestrated campaign to discredit them. *The Crisis* reported his weekly lecture at the Institute of the Industrious Classes of 28 October:

At the close of the lecture Mr Owen stated that he hoped to aid in forming several branches of the Exchange, not only in London, but throughout the country. He declared his belief, that several small establishments, commenced in London, not in connection with the Grays’ Inn Road Institution nor on the same plan, were calculated, by the erring though well-meant proceedings of their managers, greatly to injure the cause. As he had first brought forward this plan, he felt, in a measure, responsible for any injury which the public might receive from such attempts; and deemed it therefore his duty publicly [sic] to express this opinion, that all might be on their guard.<sup>436</sup>

A few days later, at a meeting of members of the Institute, Owen read

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> *The Crisis*, 30 June 1832

<sup>436</sup> *The Crisis*, 3 November 1832.

out a letter from one of them, Robert Meres, which “named and shamed” Gothic Hall and other non-Owenite bazaars, accusing them of undermining the whole labour exchange movement:

They are quite unintentionally, destroying the basis upon which alone we shall be able to raise the standard of rationality. They are unintentionally feeding the already prejudiced mind of the public, with the most substantial and powerful motives, which alone induce them, still to oppose the introduction of the Rational Social System, because, by their thus directing the members from one fixed object to others, however good they may be in principle, disunite a great number from the general body, and consequently, weaken in a great degree its efficiency, and if the measure which was introduced, “The Labour Exchanges”, were to fail I have no hesitation whatever in saying, that it would be owing to these premature schemes and bubbles being broached amongst the members, engendering at once disunion and destruction, and to these causes alone, must even a check upon its proceedings be attributed.<sup>437</sup>

In the name of unity, Meres called for a boycott of the heretics:

I do therefore, most earnestly call upon all true members and disciples of the principles of Mr Owen, to set their faces in toto, against all schemes or propositions whatever, however good they may be, providing they effect in the most remote degree, this bond of union.<sup>438</sup>

Finally, the secretary of the National Equitable Labour Exchange, E. Nash, announced that the very existence of the other bazaars was problematic, but that the “evil would soon correct itself”:

Among the difficulties we had to contend with in the commencement of our Exchange, one of the most important has been the existence in various parts of the metropolis, of Exchanges professing to be established upon our principles, and sometimes stating that they are connected with us; the effect of which has been, in many cases, that persons who have deposited goods in the Grays’ Inn Road Exchange, at the cost price, have gone to some of these bazaars with the notes they received here, and afterwards returned to complain that we had deceived them, for when they went to our Branch at such a place, they were charged at a much higher rate than we allowed for goods here. This evil, however, will soon correct itself. Let the depositors of goods, in passing through our stores observe the prices marked upon the articles, as deposited, with the commission added to it. By doing so, they may convince themselves that we adhere to our principles.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> *The Crisis*, 10 November 1832.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.* What Owen thought of his son’s earlier praise of Gothic Hall is not recorded

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*

The effect that these attacks had on the other bazaars is not known, although *The Crisis* made no further reference to them; a possible indication that they were no longer seen as a threat.<sup>440</sup> The leaders of the First Western Union Exchange and the Central Co-operative Association, Benjamin Warden and William Benbow, had clashed with Owen before and would do so again, so it is unlikely that they would have been deterred. William King, however, considered himself to be a faithful Owenite<sup>441</sup> and, according to Holyoake, “wondered that he should find an opponent in the ‘universal philanthropist’,” adding that he “was conscious of the purity of his intentions, and confident in the soundness of his principles.”<sup>442</sup> Mudie does not appear to have been prepared to toe the party line. He announced his intention to set up an exchange of his own “on Principles differing from those of any Establishment hitherto formed for that purpose”. He had taken large premises in Aldersgate Street and the institution was to be named after his Edinburgh co-operative society: the United Interests Exchange Mart and Bank.<sup>443</sup> However, it is unlikely that this project ever got off the ground; *The Gazette* ceased publication on 24 November and no further references to the United Interests Exchange have come to light.

Whatever the position of the non-Owenite bazaars, the National Equitable Labour Exchange now became the public embodiment of the labour exchange movement. Mudie seems to have accepted the reality of the situation as in June 1833 he attended a meeting of trade society delegates at Owen’s Institution, which had now moved to Charlotte Street. Trade union co-operative societies, usually comprising members of a single trade, were now a major feature of the co-operative movement and Owen was grooming them to take over the management of the National Equitable. At this particular meeting the trade societies presented a memorandum to Owen’s representative, Samuel Austin, giving details of the arrangements that they wished to introduce for managing the exchange. Mudie’s sole contribution to the meeting, as reported by *The Crisis*, was to praise Austin’s response to the memorandum and to comment that he “appeared to be the same kind and generous co-operator he had ever been”, which earned a round of applause.<sup>444</sup>

It is not known in what capacity Mudie had been in attendance; the meetings were extensively reported in *The Crisis*, but no delegates

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<sup>440</sup> The Gothic Hall bazaar still existed in early 1833, when it moved its premises; *The True Sun*, 9 February 1833.

<sup>441</sup> Robert Dale Owen, op. cit.

<sup>442</sup> G. J. Holyoake, op. cit., pp. 106-107.

<sup>443</sup> *The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars*, 17 November 1832; G. J. Holyoake, op. cit.

<sup>444</sup> *The Crisis*, 15 June 1833.

from printing or journalism, the trades associated with Mudie, are ever mentioned. Shortly afterwards, however, he chaired a meeting of the newly-formed Commonwealth of Labour, Skill and Capital, and made a long speech outlining the aims of the society, which is referred to as a union:

Mr. Mudie in the chair ... descanted in very eloquent and impassioned terms on the advantage likely to result to its members. The objects of the Union were first, the employment of the labour, skill and capital of all the members of the commonwealth on their own account, for their general benefit; secondly, the advantageous sale or exchange of such of the productions of the members as cannot be beneficially consumed by the members themselves and families; thirdly, the creation of a sufficient capital, for securing the constant employment of all the members on their own account, and their consequent prosperity, comfort and independence; fourthly, the mutual support of the members and their families during sickness and old age, and the maintenance of the widows and orphans of members; fifthly, the mutual instruction of the members, and the careful education, healthful employment, and happiness of their children.<sup>445</sup>

Six months later in Manchester he attended the inaugural meeting of the Society for Promoting National Regeneration. The Society, which comprised Owenites, factory reformers and trade unionists, was set up to campaign for an eight-hour working day. For Owen, as it had been with the management of labour exchanges by trade societies, this issue was part of a wider strategy of working more closely with trade unions, which would culminate in the formation of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union in 1834. Owen was the main speaker at the National Regeneration meeting and proposed a number of resolutions to set up the Society. Mudie's intervention was much more pointed than at the trade society meeting. He proposed an amendment which would have committed the Society to campaigning for a national minimum wage of five shillings per day; but although two other speakers supported him, Mudie's resolution was defeated and all of Owen's original resolutions were carried unanimously.<sup>446</sup>

What do these incidents tell us about Mudie's position at the end of 1833? He was clearly still fully committed to co-operation, but had broken from Owen and Owenism. His conception of co-operation was similar to that of other co-operators associated with BAPCK or NUWC. He disliked Owen's patriarchal, top-down approach and believed that working-class people were better served by setting up their own co-operative societies,

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<sup>445</sup> *The True Sun*, 23 August 1833. No further references to Mudie's Commonwealth have come to light.

<sup>446</sup> *The Crisis*, 14 December 1833.

stores and exchange bazaars, while retaining control of any accumulated capital funds, with the long-term view of setting up their own communities, although he omitted this last part from his speech to the Commonwealth of Labour, Skill and Capital. He was a passionate proponent of the economic theory that labour is the source of all wealth and opposed any attempt to make the value of labour subject to market forces. His appearance as a trade society delegate links him to the trade union wing of the co-operative movement, as does his description of the Commonwealth of Labour, Skill and Capital as a union. His call for a national minimum wage supports both the union links and his belief in the labour theory of value; had he been alive 100 years later to make such a demand, he would have been called left-wing. On the other hand, unlike several BAPCK members, he does not seem to have been drawn into radical or reformist politics. Although he addressed a meeting at NUWC headquarters, there is no evidence to suggest that he was an active NUWC member; nor is he mentioned in any histories of trade unionism. He seems to have become an isolated figure; perhaps he really did hold himself aloof.

The National Regeneration meeting was attended by John Cleave and Henry Hetherington from NUWC, both of whom seconded Owen's resolutions in a display of political unity. By now, Cleave and Hetherington were the leading figures in the unstamped press and it is in that context that Mudie may be seen, fleetingly, over the next few years.

## Working for the working-class press

*The Working classes, therefore, now distinctly see that it is impossible for them to be supplied with a sufficiency of the necessities or comforts of life, under the regime of the Capitalists.*<sup>447</sup>

1834 proved to be a particularly bad year for trade unionists, co-operators and working-class people in general.

Since their re-legalisation in 1825, unions had been in increasingly bitter conflict with employers, sometimes to try to improve pay and conditions, but more often to prevent wage cuts. Some union leaders realised that small, localised unions could become more powerful if they joined with other unions on a nationwide basis, and attempts were made to form national unions, such as the National Association for the Protection of Labour (1830) and the Operative Builders' Union (1832). These early ventures failed, but trade union membership was growing, many union branches opened their own co-operative stores and links between Owen and the unions were being forged. This culminated in the formation in February 1834 of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (GNCTU), of which Owen was the *de facto* leader.<sup>448</sup>

The long-term aim of the GNCTU was to establish a form of syndicalism, under which each trade would control its own production, to be carried out by "National Companies".<sup>449</sup> More immediate concerns, however, were the demands for financial support from numerous unions whose members were currently on strike or being locked out. The battleground between employers and unions was not confined to wages and working conditions: in the early 1830s many employers began to threaten workers with the sack if they did not formally renounce their union membership. A particularly serious lock-out was in progress at Derby just as the GNCTU was being formed:

The operatives of Derby, to the amount of 800, joined the Trades Union, for which the masters threw them out of work, and refuse to let them return unless they all withdraw from the Union, and sign a declaration not only to

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<sup>447</sup> *The Advocate of the Working Classes*, quoted in Anon., *The Book of Murder* (1839)

<sup>448</sup> The most detailed account of the GNCTU's brief history is in S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (1890). See also J.F.C. Harrison, *op. cit.*, F. Podmore, *op. cit.*, and G. Claeys, *Citizens and Saints*.

<sup>449</sup> *The Crisis* 12 October 1833, report of Owen's speech on 6 October.

that effect, but that they will not contribute in any way to the support of those that are in. The men with indignation refused to comply with such unjust and tyrannous demands; when the masters actually threw out of employ every woman and child in any way related or connected with any man in the Union; and there are now upwards of 1,800 in want of the common necessities of life, as the parochial authorities deny to all any relief, in fact they have stopped the pay of widows, who had been receiving regular weekly pay, because they had children in the Union.<sup>450</sup>

It was class war and the capitalists seemed to be winning. To make matters worse, the government weighed in on their side by encouraging the prosecution of six agricultural labourers from Dorset. The men had joined a union, which was legal, but, in doing so, had sworn an oath, which was not. With the approval of the home secretary, local magistrates gave the men the maximum sentence of transportation for seven years, and the “Tolpuddle Martyrs” became an indelible part of labour movement history. The GNCTU organised a march in protest against the Tolpuddle convictions and tried to prop up union hardship funds by imposing levies on affiliated branches. But strike after strike ended in defeat for the unions and fighting so many battles at the same time was taking its toll, both on the GNCTU’s resources and Owen’s support for trade unionism. In August, barely six months after the GNCTU had been officially founded, Owen decided to radically change its direction. The GNCTU, “having experienced much more opposition from the employers of industry, and from the wealthy portion of the public, as well as from the government, than its prompters anticipated”, called a special delegates’ meeting to consider how to “put an end to the unnatural feelings of hatred and hostility which have arisen through the ignorance alone of both parties, between masters and operatives ...”. The GNCTU was to be renamed the British and Foreign Consolidated Association of Industry, Humanity and Knowledge, and employers would be encouraged to join. The meeting unanimously elected Owen as “Grand Master of the Order” and declared that “the business of the Association shall be directed under one mind, to insure unity of design and promptness of execution”.<sup>451</sup> The new organisation would take no interest in industrial disputes. Owen’s brief flirtation with trade unionism was over and individual unions severed their links with him.<sup>452</sup>

The state of the co-operative movement was little healthier than that of the trade unions. After their initial growth spurt, many small co-operative

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<sup>450</sup> *The Crisis* 11 January 1834, letter from John Ball of Derby.

<sup>451</sup> *The Crisis*, 23 Aug 1834.

<sup>452</sup> See F. Podmore, *op. cit.*, p.453.



societies and stores began to fail; some because of the pressure caused by mass lockouts, others due to the winding up of Owen's National Equitable Labour Exchange in 1834. The National Equitable, which had commenced with such a flourish in 1832, suffered a blow to its financial stability when much stock was lost during a move to new premises. Business gradually declined and it ceased trading in mid-1834.<sup>453</sup> Even Owen's own paper, *The Crisis* was in trouble. Because of falling sales Owen had given away the paper in 1833 to the publisher Benjamin Cousins. Cousins had installed a new editor, J. E. Smith, who retained the paper's Owenite ethos while introducing some new material based on his own ideas. It worked for a while but Cousins closed down the paper in 1834. In its final edition on 23 August, Owen and Smith blamed each other for the failure.

One aspect of working-class activity that was thriving, however, in spite of government attempts to suppress it, was the unstamped press,<sup>454</sup> with which Mudie would become involved in various capacities during the mid-1830s. The stamp duty on newspapers had been increased to four pence in 1815, which took the selling price of most papers well beyond the reach of working-class readers. Radical journals, such as Cobbett's *Register*, Carlile's *Republican* and Wooler's *Black Dwarf*, sold at full price and had to rely on a network of reading societies, coffee shops and public houses where customers could read the papers. During the 1820s the government had used the laws of blasphemy and criminal libel to prosecute publishers and sellers of seditious material. 1830, however, marked a turning point: the growing demand for political reform and the activities of campaigning groups such as the NUWC, coupled with increasing standards of literacy, created the demand for cheap newspapers whose political stance mirrored that of their working-class readership. In that year, William Carpenter, Richard Carlile, Henry Hetherington and William Cobbett all published cheap, unstamped, illegal journals.<sup>455</sup> All four were prosecuted the following year; Carpenter and Hetherington for breaches of the Stamp Act, Carlile and Cobbett for criminal libel. Three of them were convicted and imprisoned, but Cobbett's acquittal caused the government to rethink its prosecution policy: it would now rely on the Stamp Act in order to obtain convictions, as it was easier to prove a case in court. Between 1831 and 1836 over 1,000 people in London alone were prosecuted for selling unstamped papers, of whom about eighty-five per cent were convicted.

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<sup>453</sup> For an analysis of why the labour exchange movement failed, see Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-207.

<sup>454</sup> For this section I have relied heavily on Patricia Hollis, *The Pauper Press: a Study in Working Class Radicalism of the 1830s* (Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>455</sup> Carpenter, *Political Letters*; Carlile, *The Prompter*; Cobbett, *Twopenny Trash*; Hetherington, *Penny Papers* and *The Republican*.

Informers were used, fines were levied, printing presses and bundles of newspapers were seized and hundreds were imprisoned as the government declared war on the bootleg newspaper industry.<sup>456</sup>

But it could not stem the tide. Numerous unstamped publications sprang up over the next few years; frequently short-lived, but enough to supply a steady stream of radical working class propaganda. Production and distribution of the unstamped press was a clandestine activity and its activists used subterfuge to avoid detection. Vendors carrying dummy packages would allow themselves to be arrested by the police while the real ones were smuggled out of the printer's by a variety of methods, including hiding them in coffins. Newspaper presses were registered under false names so that they could not be seized to pay off fines. The Victim Fund, which had been set up in the dying days of BAPCK, was used to support imprisoned vendors and their families. Unstamped papers kept selling and their market increased. Hetherington became one of the most successful unstamped publishers, with a string of radical publications, including *The Poor Man's Guardian*, the *Destructive* and the best-selling *Twopenny Dispatch*. The paper with the largest circulation was John Cleave's *Weekly Police Gazette*, which mixed radical politics with lurid accounts of crime and court proceedings, thus appealing to a wider audience.<sup>457</sup> In spite of court fines, seizure of their printing presses and five prison sentences between them, Hetherington and Cleave were highly successful businessmen.

It is in this context that Mudie next appeared. In November 1834:

George Mudie, a letter-press printer, attended before Mr Alderman Atkins, at Guildhall, to answer the complaint of Mr Bradbury, a printer, in Lombard Street, for unlawfully seducing and enticing away Joseph Garret, his apprentice, from his service. The boy went away saying he was ill, and soon after Mr Bradbury heard that he was working at four-pence an hour upon one of the illegal newspapers, called the *People's Weekly Police Gazette*, which is composed at a small printing office in Fetter Lane. He also learned, that another apprentice, named Tuck, who had pretended to be ill for a fortnight, and whose wages he had paid to him the same as when he had come into the business, had been employed the whole time, sometimes working by night as well as by day, upon the same illicit newspaper. Mr Alderman Atkins asked the defendant if he was willing to pay Mr Bradbury the full amount of the

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<sup>456</sup> It should be noted that the government only prosecuted the radical press; unstamped publications which were considered unthreatening, such as *The Crisis* and various "useful knowledge" journals, went unhindered.

<sup>457</sup> According to P. Hollis, op. cit., by 1836 the circulation of the *Weekly Police Gazette* had reached 40,000, four times as many as *The Times*.

lad's earnings, without giving him the trouble to go into the case, Mr Mudie gladly assented, and an agreement was made.<sup>458</sup>

The *People's Weekly Police Gazette* was an unstamped newspaper which had been started as a rival to Cleave's paper. Its publisher was Benjamin Cousins, another major publisher of unstamped papers, the size of whose business rivalled Hetherington's and Cleave's, but about whom very few biographical details are known. His radical publications included *The Political Register*, *The Weekly Chronicle* and *The Weekly Herald*, in which he once allegedly incited readers to attack a government informer. However, Cousins was also sympathetic towards co-operation and published the London edition of the trades union and Owenite paper, *The Pioneer*, as well as *The Crisis* and some of Owen's essays. Cousins went to some lengths to deceive the courts. One of his early publications had been printed on cotton in an unsuccessful attempt to argue that it could not be a newspaper; he sometimes used an alias (Benjamin Franklin) and had one of his printing presses registered in the name of Thomas Wilson. This last incident also involved Mudie, who acted as witness to the registration.<sup>459</sup> Mudie, then, was involved in the production of unstamped newspapers and it is little wonder that he readily accepted the chance of settling his case out of court!

The continuing success of the unstamped press, together with a parliamentary campaign by middle-class radicals, finally persuaded the government to reduce the stamp duty to one penny in 1836. The unstamped publishers wanted complete abolition and were not overly happy with the compromise, but most of them could live with it, while the legal press were delighted that they could now compete with the unstamped on equal terms. The radical, but now legitimate, press continued to thrive, widening its audience by including more items of general interest. Its political coverage tended to concentrate on the struggle which was to dominate the political arena for the next fifteen or so years: Chartism.

Although the passing of the 1832 Reform Act had alienated many working-class people from parliamentary politics, the desire for reform had not gone away. In 1836 Hetherington, Cleave, William Lovett and others formed the London Working Men's Association (LWMA) as a campaigning and educational organisation, in the tradition of BAPCK and NUWC. Similar movements were formed in other parts of the country and they eventually coalesced around a demand for universal adult male suffrage, secret ballots, abolition of the property qualification for MPs, payment

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<sup>458</sup> *The Caledonian Mercury*, 13 November 1834.

<sup>459</sup> P. Hollis, *op. cit.*, p. 162n. Hollis also notes that Mudie and Wilson later ran a stationers shop, but that was a different Mudie and a different Wilson

of MPs, equal electoral districts and annual parliamentary elections. In doing so, they became known as the Chartists.

No evidence directly linking Mudie to any Chartist activity has come to light.<sup>460</sup> He did, however, maintain links with Hetherington, writing two articles for *Hetherington's Diamond Almanack and Universal Pocket Companion for 1837*. One was called *Mudie's New and Improved Method of Writing SHORT HAND*, “with illustrative Wood Cuts, complete – acquired, written, and read with facility, after a single perusal”; the other was *A New View of Political Economy*, “by the same Author”.<sup>461</sup> Unfortunately, neither article has survived, but an idea of Mudie’s views on political economy around that time can be gleaned from his contribution to *The Book of Murder*, a notorious pamphlet which viciously attacked the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The history of the Poor Laws has been extensively researched and lies beyond the scope of this book. The following brief summary is intended to provide the background against which *The Book of Murder* was compiled.<sup>462</sup>

Prior to 1834, the old Poor Laws, an accumulation of legislation dating from the reign of Elizabeth I, gave individual parishes the responsibility for funding and administering poor relief. It was up to each parish, through “overseers” who worked to the local justice of the peace, to decide which form of relief to grant and to determine the level of “poor’s rates” that the local gentry had to pay in order to fund it.

Relief could be administered in a variety of ways. Its most common form was “outdoor relief”, whereby claimants could stay in their own homes and receive cash payments (“dole”) or gifts of food and/or clothing. In areas where the Speenhamland system was operated,<sup>463</sup> relief could also be given to those who were in full-time work but whose wages fell below the

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<sup>460</sup> For a brief history of Chartism see below, Chapter 12. For an account of the part that Mudie played in a later attempt to reconcile the Chartists with the Owenites see below, Chapter 13.

<sup>461</sup> *The London Dispatch*, 16 Oct 1836.

<sup>462</sup> Much valuable information about workhouses and the Poor Law is available on three websites: Marjorie Bloy, *A Web of English History*, (1998- 2015, <http://www.historyhome.co.uk>); Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse: The story of an institution* (2000-2015, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk>); Tim Hitchcock, Robert Shoemaker, Sharon Howard and Jamie McLaughlin, et al., *London Lives, 1690-1800* ([www.londonlives.org](http://www.londonlives.org), version 1.1, 24 April 2012). See also J. P. Huzel, *Malthus, the Poor Law, and Population in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (*Economic History Review* Vol. 22, Issue 3 December 1969); J. P. Huzel, *The Popularization of Malthus in Early 19th Century England* (Ashgate, 2006); T. Mackay, *A History of the English Poor Law, being a supplementary volume to A History of the English Poor Law by Sir George Nicholls, K.C.B., Poor Law Commissioner and secretary to the Poor Law Board* (1904); Paul Spicker, *An introduction to Social Policy: British social policy, 1601-1948* (Robert Gordon University, <http://www.spicker.uk> 2013)

<sup>463</sup> Mainly parts of Southern England and East Anglia.

cost of bread sufficient to feed their family. This enabled local employers to cut wages, secure in the knowledge that the parish would make up the difference. Where outdoor relief was not considered appropriate, “indoor relief” placed the claimant, according to individual circumstance, in an institution such as an alms-house, hospital, orphanage or, if the parish believed that the claimant was capable of work but chose not to, a poor-house or workhouse.

Originally, these laws had been seen by rich and poor alike as a social contract, under which the parish had a moral duty to look after those who were unable to work due to sickness, old age or unemployment. The depressions following the Napoleonic Wars, however, had led to steep increases in the numbers claiming relief and those who had to pay the poor’s rates were becoming resentful about the rising costs of the system. Sympathy for the poor was also being eroded by fear of strikes, riots and destruction of property. In particular, the “Swing Riots” of 1830, which affected agricultural areas of the south and east of the country, caused landowners to worry that the local peasantry was beyond their control.

One of the first actions of the incoming Whig government of 1832 was to set up a Royal Commission to look at the operation of the Poor Laws, resulting in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, frequently referred to as the New Poor Law. The Act centralised the administration of poor relief under three government-appointed Poor Law commissioners, who were given sweeping powers to make regulations and impose them on local authorities. Outdoor relief was abolished and the only way the poor could receive assistance was by entering a workhouse, where basic subsistence was given in return for hard work. The accommodation of large numbers of people who would otherwise have received outdoor relief<sup>464</sup> necessitated a major workhouse building programme; to fund this, the commissioners instructed parishes to combine into “Poor Law unions”.

The rationale of the New Poor Law was underpinned by three core beliefs. Firstly, from the writings of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill came the utilitarian idea that a person’s actions were motivated entirely by the desire to attain pleasure or to avoid pain. Therefore, it was argued, rather than working for a living, everyone would be happy to live on the dole, unless its administration was made as unpleasant as possible for the claimant. Secondly, from Ricardo and other political economists, came the argument that the granting of poor relief to those already in work interfered with market forces. They claimed that wages should be allowed to find their own level and, if a section of the labour market was removed to a

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<sup>464</sup> According to government statistics produced in 1803, eighty per cent of claimants received outdoor relief. London, with a large transient population, was an exception to the national trend; fifty-seven per cent of its paupers were in workhouses

workhouse, those who were in work might find that their wages increased. If the thought had occurred to them that employers might use fear of the workhouse as a lever to drive down wages still further, they kept it to themselves. Thirdly, Malthus's theory of population still held sway over large sections of society, who seemed to accept it as if it was proven scientific fact. Under Malthusian logic, the old Poor Laws encouraged people to marry earlier and have large families in order to claim more relief.<sup>465</sup> According to this view, they even encouraged immorality, as the parish would pay for the upkeep of illegitimate children. Thus, if left unchecked, population growth would eventually lead to mass starvation.

These beliefs combined to create a mindset which was to prove toxic for the most vulnerable in society. If you were in work you could not be regarded as poor and it was your responsibility to feed yourself and your family, irrespective of how low your wages were. If you were not in work you only had yourself to blame: you were either workshy or you had failed to put money aside to provide for sickness and old age. If you applied for poor relief you and your dependants had to go into a workhouse, where conditions were made deliberately harsh. Work was hard and monotonous, for example, picking oakum, scrubbing floors, breaking stones and crushing bones.<sup>466</sup> Food was of poor quality and often barely sufficient to stave off hunger. Families were separated, each person being put into one of seven categories,<sup>467</sup> each housed in a separate part of the workhouse and not usually allowed to communicate with those in a different section, apart from mothers of children under seven. Discipline was harsh and the scope for abuse by workhouse masters and matrons was vast.<sup>468</sup> There was nothing to stop someone discharging themselves from the workhouse in order to find work outside and re-entering later. For some, usually able-bodied men and women without dependants, this became a way of life. However, for the old, sick, handicapped or single mothers with small children, the chances of survival outside the workhouse were slim, which is why they had entered it in the first place; so they tended to stay, and, in time, become institutionalised. Not surprisingly, many thought that the

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<sup>465</sup> "He should be taught that the laws of nature had doomed him and his family to starve; that he had no claim on society for the smallest portion of food." Malthus, *op. cit.*, 2nd Edition, p. 538.

<sup>466</sup> Bone crushing was banned in 1845 following a scandal at Andover Workhouse, where the inmates were so hungry that they gnawed the bones. See Higginbottom, *op. cit.*

<sup>467</sup> Men infirm through age or any other cause; able-bodied men, and youths above the age of fifteen years; boys above the age of seven years and under that of fifteen; women infirm through age or any other cause; able-bodied women, and girls above the age of fifteen years; girls above the age of seven years and under that of fifteen; children under seven years of age. See Bloy, *op. cit.*

<sup>468</sup> See Bloy, *op. cit.*; Higginbottom, *op. cit.*



New Poor Law had criminalised poverty.

Although the Poor Law Amendment Act passed through Parliament with little difficulty, it would be many years before the infrastructure necessary to implement it was fully in place. Some parts of the country, particularly the north of England and parts of Wales, had few, if any, existing workhouses so many new ones had to be built. In the industrial cities of the north these needed to be very large in size, for if a factory shut down several hundred people were likely to become pauperised overnight. Normal delays in building were exacerbated by the activities of opponents of the new law, mainly Tories or working-class radicals, who did everything they could to frustrate its implementation. They stood for election to local boards of Poor Law guardians and, if successful, tried to prevent the board from carrying out its duties. They led rate revolts to prevent the collection of the monies needed to fund the building programmes. They addressed public meetings, published pamphlets and wrote letters to the press, attacking the New Poor Law's theoretical basis and telling horror stories about conditions in workhouses,<sup>469</sup> which were often referred to as "bastilles". The unstamped press and, later, Chartist newspapers such as *The Northern Star* and *The Northern Liberator*, were particularly vocal in their criticisms of the New Poor Law,<sup>470</sup> seeing it as part of a general attack on working-class people.

*The Book of Murder* was part of this propaganda campaign and it was written at the height of what became known as the "Marcus affair". Towards the end of 1838, two pamphlets on the subject of Malthus's population theory were published. One was *An Essay on Populousness*, which was originally printed for private circulation. Its anonymous author expressed concern at the Malthusian idea that an ever-increasing population would inevitably lead to universal human misery. He suggested a way in which "the over vegetation of nature might be confined, contented, or coerced" and offered "an hope, that it may be rendered by art and contrivance no longer inhuman, but mild, harmless, and admissible"; to which end he invited his readers to "contemplate the stifling of a just-born infant".<sup>471</sup> Following a lengthy meditation on the "interests" and "rights" of the parents that should be taken into account before the action was carried out, the author presented, in what appears to be a separate essay, his *Theory of Painless Extinction*, in which gas is gradually introduced into the infant's air supply. The author described the biological process

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<sup>469</sup> G. R. Wythen Baxter, *The Book of the Bastiles* [sic] (1841) provides numerous examples.

<sup>470</sup> "To repeal the Poor Law Act is to arrest the arm of death." *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 31 October 1835.

<sup>471</sup> Anon., *An Essay on Populousness* (1838), p.4.

by which life would be extinguished and took great pains to assure his readers that no suffering would be caused.

The other, longer, pamphlet was called *On the Possibility of Limiting Populousness* by “Marcus”. It considered the economic advantages of restricting population, the difficulties in determining the right number of children who should be allowed to live, the qualities required of those who would be entrusted to carry out the task and some practical difficulties that might be encountered. It was an expensive publication, costing two shillings, and included the *Essay on Populousness* and *Theory of Painless Extinction*, which, together with the similarity of the writing style, suggests a common authorship.

Most modern writers on the “Marcus” pamphlets believe that they were, probably, written as satires and that “Marcus” himself was either a Chartist or a Tory anti-Malthusian. However the door is usually left open to the possibility that he was a Malthusian extremist.<sup>472</sup> “Marcus” himself does little to help his readers ascertain his true intentions: his writing is prolix and he is very coy about his actual proposals. There are, however, some indications of satiric intent. A long passage where he uses “Tables of mortality” to calculate the amount of risk if the regulation of population levels was left to natural mortality rates, could be viewed as a reduction to absurdity of the idea of applying the logic of political economy to determine how many children each couple should be allowed to keep, but it is heavy going:

To this chance, then, one upon four, we must add by means of some equivalent; so that the chance become one in three. The first child must be allowed to be reared without any delay: we cannot, therefore, add to his chance of dying or of not being born. But to that of each of the other two we may add by delaying their admission into life. If by that means we make even their chance of surviving or not, we shall have reduced it too much: for the eldest-born may yet be lost; he has been saved only from the additional, not from the main risk. The additional risk then, laid on the younger two, must be so great, as to make out, not only the quantity of risk they ought themselves to bear, but that too which ought to have been borne by the first-borne beyond what he bears in fact.<sup>473</sup>

More obviously satirical is the author’s flight of fancy about the burial

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<sup>472</sup> Thorough accounts of the “Marcus affair” are in John Knott, *Popular Opposition to the 1834 Poor Law* (Croom Helm, 1986) and Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture, 1720-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2003). For a different view, see William Coleman, *Perverse Civilisation and Natural Barbarism* (article written for the website [www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk](http://www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk) 2006).

<sup>473</sup> *On the Possibility of Limiting Populousness*, p. 12.



ground of the infants who have been gassed:

Imagine then a colonnade, closed and gently warmed in the winter, fresh in summer, verdant always, yet not expensive in exotice; not too distant for the daily disport of all classes, yet silencing vulgarity by an amiable and religious formality. Let this be the infants paradise; every parturient female may be considered as enlarging or embellishing it. This field of fancy will amuse her confinement, and will please by the reflection that her labour will have not been in vain, and that even posterity are to be the better for it.<sup>474</sup>

The touchstone for satire of this kind is Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, which had famously suggested that a healthy one-year-old child would make "most delicious nourishing and wholesome food".<sup>475</sup> Swift's pamphlet became a popular reference point for anti-New Poor Law campaigners. *The Times* reprinted it in 1834, suggesting that the government put Swift's plan into practice, as a quick death was preferable to slowly dying of starvation in a workhouse.<sup>476</sup> A few months before "Marcus" appeared, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* had published an article entitled *New Scheme for Maintaining the Poor*, which specifically referenced Swift's work and aimed its satire at the vanity of the Poor Law commissioners:

The skins of very young children I would have sold for ladies' albums; for which purpose, embossed with cherubim heads, they will fetch a great price; and the proceeds may greatly help towards paying the salaries of the Poor-Law Commissioners, and the significant innocency [sic] of the one source of this income make their office appear more respectable.<sup>477</sup>

However, whereas Swift's pamphlet is short, to the point and razor sharp, and the *New Scheme*, while derivative, at least has plenty of bite, the satiric edge of "Marcus" is blunted by the density of his prose.

Irrespective of the intentions behind the "Marcus" pamphlets, as soon as opponents of the New Poor Law became aware of their existence they saw a golden propaganda opportunity. Joseph Rayner Stephens, a maverick clergyman, Chartist and passionate campaigner against the New Poor Law, alluded to it in a sermon where he alleged that the pamphlets were supportive of the wishes of the Poor Law commissioners. It was reported to the commissioners that Stephens had accused one of them of being "Marcus" and they issued an outraged denial, quickly followed by a

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<sup>474</sup> *An Essay On Populousness*, p. 15.

<sup>475</sup> Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal For preventing the children of poor people in Ireland, from being a burden on their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the publick* (1729)

<sup>476</sup> *The Times*, 24 July 1834.

<sup>477</sup> *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, April 1838.

press-release from their assistant commissioners, claiming that they were equally innocent of the charge. The Whig press supported the commissioners, refusing to believe that the pamphlet existed at all and questioning Stephens's sanity.<sup>478</sup>

By doing so, they ensured that maximum publicity was given to the affair. Stephens went on the warpath, writing a long letter to *The Times*, in which he claimed that, as he was currently on bail awaiting trial for making seditious speeches, he had to be careful about what he said; and he had certainly not accused the commissioners of writing the pamphlet. He did, however, say that the plan proposed by "Marcus" was "mercy itself compared with the piecemeal, inch-by-inch inflictions of bodily and mental torture upon the poor", which he alleged had been meted out by the Poor Law commissioners over the last five years;<sup>479</sup> and he dared them to deny it:

I do not say – I never did say – I never gave them so much credit for courage as to suppose, that they were bold enough to publish the "book" of Marcus; but I do say this – and as they have entered into a public controversy on this point – I am prepared to meet them. They have given me the challenge; I hereby accept it. If they do not approve of the system of Marcus, to reduce the population of England, then, in the face of all the wives, the mothers, and sisters of England, I hereby declare them to be more unmerciful than Marcus himself.<sup>480</sup>

Around this time the "Marcus" pamphlets became unobtainable in bookshops. They had probably simply sold out, but their disappearance at the height of the controversy gave the opposition the chance to claim that the government had suppressed them. The originals became collectors' items, selling for two guineas, while the working-class press gleefully advertised various pirate editions for three pence.<sup>481</sup> One such, printed by W. Dugdale, 37 Holywell Street, Strand, London, claimed to be:

the only one that is verbatim from the text of the original suppressed edition, so eloquently denounced by the Rev. Mr. Stephens. It is prefaced by a most masterly Refutation of the Impious and Absurd Doctrines of the Malthusians

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<sup>478</sup> "He says distinctly that he has seen such recommendations as the above in a printed book! Now, either he must be stark mad, or he must be desperately wicked." *The Leeds Mercury*, quoted in *The Northern Star*, 12 January 1839.

<sup>479</sup> J.R. Stephens, Letter to *The Times*, 11 January 1839. He was imprisoned for eighteen months.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid. Stephens later denied that he was ever a Chartist, but was closely linked to the movement in the 1830s.

<sup>481</sup> *The Northern Star*, 9, 16 and 23 February, 9, 16, 23 and 30 March, 6 April 1839.

and Political Economists, showing their natural tendency to enslave the many for the benefit of the few.<sup>482</sup>

This publication later became known as *The Book of Murder*, but its first edition bore the title page:

Child Murder!!! A reprint, word for word, of the infamous production by  
Marcus advocating the murder of the children of the poor.

On the Possibility of Limiting Populousness  
An Essay on Populousness  
The Theory of Painless Extinction  
by Marcus

London  
Thomas White, Printer, 59 Wych Street, Strand  
Sold by Abel Heywood, 60 Oldham Street, Manchester  
Price Threepence

In this edition, the three “Marcus” pamphlets were printed in full, preceded by a Preface and an Introduction, entitled “To the Reader of the following Diabolical Work”. A few weeks later the book was reissued; and this is the version of the book which has survived. It contained an additional Preface and a title page which now read:

Second Edition (with an additional Preface) of –  
The Book of Murder  
Vade-mecum for the Commissioners and Guardians of the New Poor Law  
Throughout Great Britain and Ireland,  
Being an exact reprint of the infamous essay  
On the Possibility of Limiting Populousness,  
by Marcus, one of the three.  
With a refutation of the Malthusian Doctrine.

Printed by John Hill, Black Horse Court, Fleet St,  
and now reprinted for the Instruction of the Labourer  
by William Dugdale, No 37, Holywell Street, Strand.  
Price Three-Pence.

The page was completed by some lines of verse by Southey and a biblical quote “Rachael weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they were not”.

The aim of *The Book of Murder* was to smear the Poor Law commissioners with guilt by association with “Marcus”, who was constantly referred

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<sup>482</sup> *The Odd Fellow*, 23 March and 20 April 1839.

to as “the Demon Author”, while the reference to “one of the three” pointed the finger directly at the three commissioners. The Introduction and Prefaces contain some powerful polemical writing, albeit wildly over the top at times. The shrill tone was established early on, in a reference to the disappearance of the original “Marcus” pamphlets:

The unexplained suppression of this murder-book requires to be noticed. The fiend who wrote it would never have withdrawn it, particularly at the very moment when it was in great demand, unless in consequence of the speech delivered against it by Mr. Stephens. No – the obscene butchering wretch would never consent to forego the profits.<sup>483</sup>

The Introduction continued in much the same vein; its author urging readers to stay calm while he described the “Marcus” pamphlets in evermore inflammatory language:

Recoil not, Reader, with a shudder of incredulity, or a start of horror, from an accusation which must appear to you to be necessarily as unfounded as it is monstrous! Read the Essay of the Demon Author whose work is now placed in your hands; you will be satisfied that at least one plotter of this wholesale assassination has fully revealed his frightful criminality to the world.<sup>484</sup>

The author then attacked the Poor Law Amendment Act’s controversial “bastardy clause”, which had made it much more difficult for unmarried mothers to apply to the courts for maintenance orders, thus making the mother, to all intents and purposes, solely responsible for looking after an illegitimate child. The resulting upsurge of child murders by desperate mothers, who would otherwise have to enter the workhouse, was a recurring theme of the anti-new Poor Law campaigners, who accused the authorities of turning a blind eye to working-class infanticide as it would save them the expense of housing the illegitimate child:

And though child-murder was expected and intended, it is becoming more and more frequent, the efforts to detect the perpetrators have been relaxed! Formerly, rewards were offered for the discovery of the murderers, that practice has been abandoned! As examples, in two of the workhouses of London itself, in the last week of January, 18-- , two coroner’s Inquests found, upon view of the bodies of two dead infants, verdicts of Willful Murder against some person or persons unknown: – and yet, the parochial authorities have offered no reward for the discovery and apprehensions of the murderers!!!<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>483</sup> Anon., *The Book of Murder*, Preface to 1st Edition, 1839.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 2nd Edition, p.3.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., p. 5. See also J. McDonagh, op.cit.

These passages are very similar in style and content to speeches and articles written by Stephens and other anti-New Poor Law campaigners, such as Richard Oastler and the editors of *The Northern Star* and *The Northern Liberator*.<sup>486</sup> However, the histrionic style gave way to more controlled anger when the writer linked the “Demon Author” to the theories of Malthus, which he said had been refuted once before and must now be refuted again:

But though it would be useless, because it is unnecessary, to argue with the Demon Author upon his propositions, the very fact of the existence of the Poor Laws, and of the Murder-Book prove the necessity for once more attacking the doctrine of Malthus, and for identifying his doctrine with the Conspirators, and the Conspirators at large, with the Demon Author. Malthus has been refuted already – repeatedly refuted. Not only he, but the whole of the spurious school in Political Economy to which the Conspirators belong, were completely refuted by George Mudie, in his *The Advocate of the Working Classes*, published at Edinburgh in 1826-7, and in others of his writings.<sup>487</sup>

The attack on Malthus included several passages from *The Advocate of the Working Classes*, some of which have already been quoted.<sup>488</sup> These references do not, of course, prove that Mudie was the author of *The Book of Murder*, although the question arises who, other than Mudie himself, would have been in a position to quote at length from one of his most obscure journals, written twelve years earlier, with a circulation confined almost entirely to Edinburgh. More compelling evidence of Mudie’s authorship, however, may be seen by comparing the passages immediately before and after the quotes from *The Advocate* with Mudie’s earlier writings. The tone, sentence construction and economic arguments do not change. The similarity to passages in *The Economist*, *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist* and *The Advocate of the Working Classes* is marked:

But the too appalling fact, that the people of this country are at this moment in the melancholy condition above stated, is not (as Malthus and his disciples have imagined) owing to a fatal destiny imposed upon them by a merciful and munificent God, – but is solely owing to human rapacity and to human ignorance, – is solely owing to the want of wise and just laws for protecting the

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<sup>486</sup> Oastler, a radical Tory, had in 1837 delivered a speech entitled *Damnation! Eternal Damnation to the Fiend Begotten “Coarser Food” New Poor Law*, published by Henry Hetherington. *The Book of Murder* also includes an advertisement for a political meeting, written in 1833, entitled *Child Murder No Crime!!!*

<sup>487</sup> *The Book of Murder*, 2nd Edition, p.5.

<sup>488</sup> See Chapter 7, above

labouring poor from the rapacity of the capitalists, who not only underpay the labouring poor, but divert their labour to useless or improper purposes, and of laws for enforcing the proper employment of a just reward for labour, – for labour, the parent of all commodities, – for labour, which is able, at any time, to produce twenty times more food than all the inhabitants of the world are able to consume.<sup>489</sup>

Marcus, Malthus and the Poor Law commissioners, however, were not *The Book of Murder*'s only targets: the idea of infanticide, Mudie said, had been mooted by such writers as William Godwin and Francis Place. Putting Godwin and Malthus on the same side of the debate was an act of political sleight of hand; after all, Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* had been published as a riposte to Godwin's ideas on the perfectibility of human nature. Both men, however, had been concerned about population increase amongst the poor. Malthus had argued that man's natural tendency to reproduce would ensure that population increased faster than the means to support it, until it was curbed by vice (i.e. sexual activity that did not result in childbirth) or misery (i.e. starvation and disease). Malthus realised that, for working-class people, it was misery, rather than vice, that would keep down their population and proposed that children should not be entitled to Poor Law relief. Godwin believed that man was capable of making moral choices to control population; sexual abstinence was one such choice, abortion was another and so was infanticide. He was not keen on "the exposing of children", but maintained that it might be preferable to the Malthusian solutions of vice and misery:

What was called the exposing of children prevailed to a very extensive degree in the ancient world. The same practice continues to this hour in China. I know that the prejudices and habits of modern Europe are strongly in arms against this institution. I grant that it is very painful and repulsive to the imagination of persons educated as I and my countrymen have been. And I hope, and trust, that no such expedient will be necessary to be resorted to, in any state of society which shall ever be introduced in this or the surrounding countries. Yet, if we compare it with misery and vice, the checks pleaded for in the *Essay on Population*, what shall we say?<sup>490</sup>

Francis Place had been more explicit. Place had been an active radical since the 1790s but was a firm supporter of orthodox political economy, Malthus's population theory and the New Poor Law. In *Illustrations and*

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<sup>489</sup> *The Book of Murder*, p.6. For the purposes of this book Mudie's authorship of the 2nd Edition is assumed.

<sup>490</sup> W. Godwin, *Thoughts Occasioned By The Perusal Of Dr. Parr's Spital Sermon* (1801).

*Proofs of the Principle of Population; including an Examination of the Proposed Remedies of Mr. Malthus*, Place had criticised both Godwin's infanticide and Malthus's denial of parish aid to children. His preferred solution was contraception, but Place made it clear that he would not completely rule out either the Malthusian or Godwinian options:

I, however, have no hesitation in saying, that if other and better means could not be found, that however painful it might be to my feelings, however revolting, however intense the suffering, and however widespread in the first instance, I would at once recommend their adoption, were it made clear to my understanding, that they would materially and permanently benefit the working people in their pecuniary circumstances, without making them in other respects more vicious.<sup>491</sup>

The issue of birth control was controversial within both the radical and Owenite groups.<sup>492</sup> Richard Carlile was an enthusiastic supporter, as were William Thompson and Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen. Owen himself was non-committal, although some have claimed that he was in favour. Firmly against were T. J. Wooler's *Black Dwarf* and the trade union-supporting *Trade's Newspaper*. In their unstamped publications Hetherington and Cleave carried, without comment, advertisements for pro-contraception pamphlets, but Hetherington's editor, Bronterre O'Brien, was opposed. Mudie was also in the opposition camp, peremptorily dismissing contraception as no better than murder. He announced that the subject would be one of those to be raised in his forthcoming publication, *The Alarm Bell; or, the Voice of the Spirit of Truth*.<sup>493</sup>

What linked Malthus, Godwin and Place was not a fondness for child murder, but an unquestioning belief that human suffering was a direct result of over-population; as Malthus had put it, the table at "nature's mighty feast" was already full.<sup>494</sup> Mudie challenged both this core belief and the suggested remedies of its adherents. If Malthus's theory was correct, he argued, it would then be necessary, not to kill off the poor, but to restructure society and redistribute its wealth:

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<sup>491</sup> F. Place, *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population; including an Examination of the Proposed Remedies of Mr. Malthus* (1822), p. 142.

<sup>492</sup> See J. P. Huzel, *The Popularization of Malthus in Early 19th Century England* (Ashgate, 2006), pp. 200-214.

<sup>493</sup> *The Book of Murder*, 2nd Edition, p. 8. At least one copy of *The Alarm Bell* is known to have survived into the twentieth century, see G. Claeys, *Further Journalistic Efforts of George Mudie: The Edinburgh Cornucopia and The Alarm Bell*, 1831-38 (Bulletin; SSLH, Vol. 51 No 3 1986). However, if it is still in existence, it is not publicly available.

<sup>494</sup> R. Malthus, op. cit.

## The Hidden Oak

Now, if it really were true, that there were in this country more people than places for them, it would certainly be necessary not to rein in the ranks of the people, by the diseases of poverty, or the with-holding entirely the necessities of life, or the murder of the newly-born but to review the constitution of society, in order to ascertain whether many men do not occupy more than one place each, and also to see whether it be not possible to discover or create more places; and, if it should be impossible to find more places, whether, in that case, it were not necessary and more just, rather so to remodel society, as to restrict each person to the occupancy of a single place, than to permit great multitudes of the people to perish, while there are yet multitudes of places available for their reception and subsistence.<sup>495</sup>

But Mudie did not accept Malthus's theory. He stated the core of his case against capitalism: that capitalists controlled the application of human labour and it was in their interests to ensure that production was not determined by the wants of the people, but by the amount of profit that capitalists thought they could make; that this "restraining principle" would continue unless the government intervened by making "legislative enactments", only when the working classes controlled the application of their own labour would they be able to produce sufficient food and other necessities to satisfy their own needs. He argued that there were sufficient resources to maintain five times the present population, without having to resort to redistribution; and, in a powerful passage, he accused Malthus of contriving his theory as a means of preserving the political status quo, although some might argue that he let the government off far too lightly:

Is there not too much reason for concluding, that the whole mass of the Malthusian doctrines, is not the offspring of ignorance, but is a purposely-contrived scheme to attempt, by means of misrepresentation and falsehood, and of an artfully-constructed fabric of specious though fallacious reasonings, and of both logical and illogical subtlety and sophistry, to accomplish the threefold object of tranquillizing, soothing, and lulling the consciences of the rich, so liable to be disturbed, even in the midst of their enjoyments, by the hideous and revolting spectacle of the wretchedness existing around them and even grovelling beneath their feet, – of pacifying and reconciling the poor and working masses to the hard and unmerited lot that has been imposed upon them, – and even of deceiving and paralyzing governments and legislatures, whose sense of justice and desire of glory might otherwise induce them to

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<sup>495</sup> *The Book of Murder*, Preface to 2nd Edition.



apply a healing hand to the ills of suffering humanity, – by equally persuading all parties, that the malady of society is alike inevitable and incurable?<sup>496</sup>

It is possible, even tempting, to argue that Mudie was only responsible for the sections of *The Book of Murder* which attacked Malthus and Place, while another writer, of lesser ability, contributed the more histrionic passages, particularly the Preface to the 1st Edition and the first part of the Introduction. *The Book of Murder* could well have been compiled by people close to Stephens and the Chartist newspapers, whose style it mirrors and whose readers formed a large part of its intended audience, with Mudie being brought in to confront Malthus and the other “conspirators”. Mudie, however, was quite capable of going over the top without anyone else’s help; he had made a living from it in Nottingham and Leeds, and even his most measured publication, *The Economist*, was not immune to such passages:

These men have seen their FRIENDS and NEIGHBOURS—nay—the MOTHERS who bore them—their aged SIREs—their WIVES—the CHILDREN even of their loins—PERISH before their eyes—in the wasting torments of disease and want;—or, frantic with suffering, embrue their murderous hands in each other’s BLOOD—yet have all these horrors only made each of them more closely invest his individual wealth—wealth which neither of them can exhaust—and the free circulation of which would have secured them, their friends, their neighbours, and their families, from the miseries with which all have indiscriminately been afflicted.<sup>497</sup>

Melodramatic as it is, *The Book of Murder*, does however, contain some of Mudie’s most powerful writing and deserves to be remembered as more than just an outrageous example of anti-Malthusian propaganda. On one level, the propaganda was successful: in the eyes of many people, Malthus’s name would remain linked with infanticide for many years to come, even though he had advocated no such thing. But the propaganda did not stop the workhouses, which would blight the fabric of the nation for nearly 100 years; and the fear of ending one’s days in a workhouse, or of being buried in a paupers’ grave, would endure in the minds of many people long after the institution had been abolished.

It would be ten years before Mudie published any further writings of a political nature which have survived. In the late 1830s he turned his attention more towards his other interests: education and bringing cheap literature to the masses.

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<sup>496</sup> Ibid

<sup>497</sup> *The Economist*, No. 3 (10 February 1821).

## English grammar and cheap literature

*You are all very well, Gentlemen, to pass muster amongst the crowd of literary pigmies, – and you certainly have so passed muster with some éclat.*<sup>498</sup>

The few references that have come to light suggest that Mudie spent the mid-1830s picking up work wherever he could, whether it be printing or writing articles commissioned by radical publishers. In 1838, however, he made an attempt to re-launch his cheap literature publication *The Cornucopia Britannica*. At least four editions were printed, drawing a warm review from *The Idler*:

The article entitled “A Schoolboy’s Recollections of a Military Execution” displays considerable ability and proves Mr Mudie to be every way capable of providing for the public appetite.<sup>499</sup>

while *Cleave’s Penny Gazette* welcomed Mudie as an old friend:

We hail with unfeigned pleasure the re-appearance of Mr. G. Mudie in the world of Literature, in which he for many years labored with no ordinary success, but whence we have missed him for some time past. *The Cornucopia Britannica*, a weekly journal of literature and science, affords us an opportunity of congratulating him and the public on his re-appearance, as an able expounder of the soundest principles of political economy, and as a general writer whose cultivated and well-informed mind, and whose graces of style and diction, can scarcely fail to render him popular in the present reading era. We heartily wish him success in his new and important undertaking of promoting the intelligence and power, the virtue and felicity, of our common race.<sup>500</sup>

But, like so many of Mudie’s publications, *The Cornucopia* quickly petered out and, after his involvement with *The Book of Murder* and *The Alarm Bell*, Mudie now concentrated on educational issues. He gave private lessons in English grammar at his home in 243½ The Strand, and published an illustrated children’s alphabet reader, *The Illuminated Temple of Letters*, “whereby the alphabet may be taught to infants in one

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<sup>498</sup> G. Mudie, *1st Letter to William and Robert Chambers*, September 1840.

<sup>499</sup> *The Idler and breakfast table companion*, 19 May 1838.

<sup>500</sup> *Cleave’s Penny Gazette*, 26 May 1838.

day and reading is really made easy”,<sup>501</sup> which has not survived. What has survived is his textbook, *The Grammar of the English Language truly made Easy and Amusing by the Invention of Three Hundred Moveable Parts of Speech*. This was a mixed-media publication, using simple visual aids to overcome the tediousness of learning complicated grammatical rules by rote. The package included a textbook of lesson plans for use by teachers, and a box containing a large number of coloured cards, each with a single word written on it. The cards were grouped by separate colours into different parts of speech (nouns, verbs etc) which could be assembled to make sentences and then reassembled to alter the meaning of the sentence. For Mudie, the key aspect of the lesson plan was that the teacher must clearly explain to the pupils the significance of rearranging the sentence, and only introduce the grammatical rules when the children have seen practical examples of them. The lessons were meant to be fun and one review, which was otherwise uncomplimentary, confirmed that they were:

That this grammar is “truly amusing” we can vouch, having set a party of children in a roar of laughter in the attempt to test the efficacy of its instruction.<sup>502</sup>

But the textbook had attitude. Mudie clearly cared passionately about children’s education and, in a typically feisty preface, he introduced his book as an educational new broom:

In smoothing and making plain the course for my youthful followers, I have aimed at leaving not a single cart-load of the rubbish which I found upon the ground.<sup>503</sup>

He lambasted authors of traditional grammar textbooks for forcing their pupils “to go through the drudgery of committing to memory a set of unintelligible rules”,<sup>504</sup> which rendered the subject “so abstract, and apparently both complicated and vast”<sup>505</sup> that the teachers did more harm than good to a child’s education:

every instance in which children are forced to mumble and dwell upon unintelligible jargon, not only wastes but depresses their energies – has a direct

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<sup>501</sup> G. Mudie, *The Grammar of the English Language truly made Easy and Amusing by the Invention of Three Hundred Moveable Parts of Speech* (J. Cleave, 1840), Preface.

<sup>502</sup> *The Spectator*, 10 Apr 1841.

<sup>503</sup> G. Mudie, op. cit.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid.

tendency to stultify and even to paralyze their mental faculties, and assuredly fills them with loathing and abhorrence of those very tasks which, if they cannot always be rendered delightful, should at least be divested of everything calculated to make them unnecessarily disagreeable.<sup>506</sup>

Most reviews of the book were positive, with reviewers agreeing with Mudie's criticisms of traditional teaching methods, but some were not impressed:

This extraordinary production is otherwise remarkable for the over-ingenuity of its inventor: it is half-book half-box, the box containing the "moveable parts of speech" printed on strips of card; and it is as troublesome to pick out from the heap of separate words any particular one as it is difficult to extract a meaning from the verbose repetitions of the text.<sup>507</sup>

Mudie now had the bit between his teeth. Continuing his educational theme he announced that three further books were in preparation: *A Musical and Mechanical key to the Infant Soul*, "whereby the precise Degree of Sensibility of infants from one month to eighteen months old may be accurately measured and determined", *The Mechanical Shorthand Writer*, "for enabling any person who can spell instantaneously to write shorthand, and whereby not only lectures, sermons and other orations, but even the brilliant sayings at conversational meetings and other parties may be recorded and preserved", and *The Philosophy of Grammar*, "Rhetorical and Written Composition".<sup>508</sup> Unfortunately, there is no evidence that these books were ever completed and Mudie's well of creativity seems to have dried up at this point. He did, however, write two letters on a subject close to his heart, cheap literature, which contain important biographical information as well as providing an insight into Mudie's state of mind at the time.

When Mudie had been forced to leave Edinburgh in 1832 the most popular cheap literary publication was *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, which had been launched on 4 February, priced one-and-a-half pence. Its editors, William and Robert Chambers, had set out to create a magazine that would appeal to all sections of society, but their prime audience was working-class people, whom they wished to inculcate with middle-class values. Overt political and religious opinions were eschewed in favour

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> *The Spectator*, 10 Apr 1841; see also *The Teetotaler*, 17 Apr 1841; *The London Saturday Journal*, 29 May 1841; *The Westminster Review*, July 1841; *The Northern Star*, 18 September 1841; *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction*, 30 Jul 1842; Manfred Gorch, *English in 19th Century England* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>508</sup> G. Mudie, *The Grammar of the English Language etc*, final page.

of articles of general interest, useful knowledge, poetry and fiction, in order to give the working man “a meal of healthful, useful and agreeable mental instruction”.<sup>509</sup> It was professionally produced, easy to read and bland; a formula which proved so successful that the *Journal* lasted until 1956. The reading public was developing a great appetite for fiction, so the inclusion of short stories and serialised novels was particularly popular. The radical press tapped into this market, appealing to a lower-brow audience with sensationalist stories of crime and romance, so by the time *The Cornucopia Britannica* made its brief reappearance in 1838, Mudie had a host of competitors.

How Mudie felt about his unsuccessful venture can only be guessed, but when he heard that the Chambers brothers had spuriously claimed to have invented the whole genre of cheap literature he was furious, knowing full well that his publication had preceded theirs. He wrote two open letters to William and Robert Chambers which were published in *Cleave’s Penny Gazette* in September 1840. The letters are long, over 5,000 words in total, and at times long-winded, even rambling. Mudie was too close to the subject; his pride had been wounded and both his anger with the Chamberses, for stealing his thunder, and bitter frustration at his own lack of success poured out.

He started by attacking the Chambers’ language, imagination and taste, which he thought were just about good enough for writing “light literary articles”; and he acknowledged the Chambers’ success in that field with a stinging rebuke:

you are all very well, Gentlemen, to pass muster amongst the crowd of literary pigmies, – and you certainly have so passed muster with some *éclat*.<sup>510</sup>

However, the Chambers brothers, he said, were not content to stick to lightweight subject matter. They had attempted to tackle science and philosophy, which took them into “an atmosphere which you are not constituted to breathe”; but their lack of understanding had not deterred them from expressing trite opinions:

in tumbling down again to your just level, you have brought back with and diffused around you only noxious vapours from the sinks of error, though like all other nostrum dealers, you swear that they are salubrious emanations fresh imported from the wells of truth.<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>509</sup> *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 4 February 1832, editor’s address.

<sup>510</sup> 1st letter to William and Robert Chambers, *Cleave’s Penny Gazette of Variety and Amusement*, 5 September 1840.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid*

They even had the gall, in his eyes, to pontificate about political economy:

you presume to prate about political economy, about the inevitable condition of labour and labourers, about their wages, and the principles by which in your ignorance you fancy that wages are beneficially regulated, about freedom of trade, and many other things of which you literally know nothing whatever, but in your most officious and impertinent intermeddling with what is far beyond your province, continually repeating dogmas and spinning trains of fallacies, which, notwithstanding their flimsiness and their absurdity, have been emitted by the insect tribes in quantities so vast as to have involved society in those labyrinthian meshes of a spurious and repudiated science which still prolongs the evils of vice and poverty amongst mankind, after the means of banishing vice and poverty forever from the abodes of men have been long discovered and promulgated.<sup>512</sup>

It is fun to read Mudie's blistering attack on the chattering classes of his time, with their "flagrant quackery" and "exhaustless phial of the sweet oil of self-complacency".<sup>513</sup> However, his own claim to be the inventor of cheap literature, although demonstrably stronger than that of the Chamberses, was, at best, unproven and he acknowledged the possibility that a similar paper to *The Edinburgh Cornucopia* had been published in London at around the same time. His main concern seems to have been to establish his credentials as a well-educated and sometime successful man of literature and journalism: the sort of person who can see through linguistic chicanery. To this end he provided biographical details from the parts of his life of which he was most proud, some of which are not available from any other source. He stressed his education: surrounded as a child by books in his father's shops; attending the same school as Lord Brougham, the former lord chancellor; taught by distinguished men of literature and science; and serving his apprenticeship in public speaking at the Edinburgh Forum. He cited his early lectures on political economy and his founding of Spa Fields, making great play of the fact that the community numbered the poet Robert Southey amongst its supporters and of the personal praise that he had received from

a gentleman who has long been known as a most talented writer in the cause of philanthropy, under the signature of "*Philadelphus*", who at the time held an office in the government of this empire scarcely inferior to that of a cabinet

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

minister, – and who is as transcendently eminent for his research, his acquirements, and his genius, as for his benevolence and his virtues.<sup>514</sup>

These passages contain a lot of name-dropping and beg the question why Mudie was so keen to affirm his status in a letter addressed to people of whom he had such low opinion. The answer, perhaps, lies in the part of the letter where he accuses the Chambers brothers of giving their ill-informed opinions on

the condition of millions of your at least equally meritorious fellow countrymen doomed to cheerless penury and hopeless toil, or to the still harder fate of awaiting in listless inactivity the fulfilment of that lot which has consigned them to suffer and to starve.<sup>515</sup>

Who was Mudie thinking of in the second part of that sentence, if not himself? In *The Book of Murder* he had alluded to the apathy of the working classes towards the economic arguments that he had been putting forward for many years. He was not now directly associated with either Owenites or Chartists and to all intents and purposes was politically silent; nor does his interest in education seem to have led anywhere. Was he thinking of that when he talked about “listless inactivity”? For all their bluster and bravado, the letters have an air of self-pity. Had Mudie come to the depressing conclusion that, in spite of his undoubted talent, his career had ground to a halt? Apart from a couple of brief incidents he was to remain out of the public eye for a further eight years. That he re-emerged at all is evidence of his resilience and self-belief.

In fact, he bounced back, albeit briefly, in 1841, with a pamphlet entitled *A New Benefit Society for the Working Class*. The pamphlet has not survived, but it was reviewed in *The London Phalanx*, a journal devoted to the ideas of the French communitarian, Charles Fourier. *The Phalanx* made encouraging noises:

This is a very simple plan for establishing a Domestic Club, a Savings Bank, and Trades Society, blended in one association for the general advantage of the working classes, and we believe it to be practical if properly conducted; but the difficulty lies in finding men to govern and direct with prudence and discretion, and due probity, so undisciplined a body as would necessarily be brought at once in contact with each other. The attempt, however, is worth

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<sup>514</sup> 2nd letter to William and Robert Chambers, *Cleave's Penny Gazette of Variety and Amusement* 12 September 1840.

<sup>515</sup> 1st letter to William and Robert Chambers.

making, and we cordially encourage the concoctors to proceed with zeal and perseverance.<sup>516</sup>

This sounds similar to the working-class, union-based, co-operative societies that Mudie and others had founded in the 1820s and 1830s. Some years later, in a letter to Owen, he mentioned his New Benefit Society, but implied that it had never got off the ground:

I have since that time made some ineffective, because necessarily very feeble, attempts to establish a small weekly periodical, and to form a new co-operative Society in London, under the title of The New-Benefit Society No. 1.<sup>517</sup>

But the fact that he tried it at all is of interest, because, apart from Owen's national organisation, the histories of the co-operative movement scarcely mention any local societies between the collapse of the labour exchanges in 1834 and the reinvention of co-operative stores by the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844. One such was the Community Friendly Society, founded in 1836 in John Street, Clerkenwell, "for the mutual relief and maintenance of the members, and for the purpose of promoting the well being of themselves and families upon the principles of co-operation".<sup>518</sup> The Society operated a shop and produced an annual report in 1837, after which nothing more is known. At Manea Fen, Cambridgeshire, a small agricultural co-operative community was set up in 1838 under the leadership of William Hodson; in spite of criticisms from Owen, it survived for three years. And the official Owenite movement had its own community at Queenwood, Hampshire, between 1839 and 1845.<sup>519</sup> Many working-class co-operators, however, had put their energies into Chartism, and those co-operative societies which did exist were low-key and unpublicised. For all the "feebleness" of his efforts, Mudie clearly had not lost his belief in co-operative principles and he deserves credit for trying to keep the flame of working-class co-operation flickering.

How long Mudie persevered with the New Benefit Society is not known and if he wrote anything during the mid-1840s it has remained undiscovered. There was, however, one episode which provides a clue as to the company that he was keeping at this time. The issue was cheap literature, the author of the literature in question was Charles Dickens and its

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<sup>516</sup> *The London Phalanx*, 13 November 1841.

<sup>517</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848

<sup>518</sup> *Rules to be observed for the government and management of the Community Friendly Society* (1836).

<sup>519</sup> R. G. Garnett, op. cit., covers the Community Friendly Society; for accounts of Manea Fen, see Dennis Hardy, *Alternative Communities in 19th Century England* (Longman, 1979), as well as the community's own paper *The Working Bee*; for Queenwood, see below, Chapter 12.



cheapness was the subject of court proceedings.

Ever since *Pickwick Papers* had appeared in 1836, Dickens had been extensively plagiarised. His novels were published in monthly instalments, costing one shilling per part; a price well beyond the budget of most working-class people. To meet the growing demand for fiction, cheap adaptations of Dickens and other writers regularly appeared, usually costing a penny or so. Between 1841 and 1843 one particular publication, *Parley's Penny Library*, published “analytically reproduced”<sup>520</sup> versions of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*, as well as his *American Notes* and a short story. Although Dickens hated these plagiarisms, he took no action to stop them. In fact, his publishers had even inserted advertisements into his magazine, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, for “Cheap illustrations of *Boz*”, *The Twist and Nickleby Scrap Sheet* and other cheap Dickensia.<sup>521</sup> However, when *A Christmas Carol* received the same treatment Dickens could stand it no longer. The *Carol* was published in its entirety shortly before Christmas 1843, at a cost of five shillings. In early January, another *Parley's* publication, *Parley's Illuminated Library*, included the first half of *A Christmas Ghost Story*, whose publishers described it as “reoriginated from the original by Charles Dickens, Esquire, and analytically condensed expressly for this work”. Its plot and characters were identical to those of the *Carol*.

Dickens obtained court injunctions against the publishers, printers and distributors of *Parley's* to prevent any further circulation of *A Christmas Ghost Story*, which he described as “mere piracy”. Of the five injunctions issued, only one was challenged. The partnership of Richard Egan Lee and John Haddock, who had printed and published the offending story, tried to have their injunction quashed in the Chancery Court.<sup>522</sup> The hearing involved no witnesses, merely sworn affidavits presented by counsel. Lee's own affidavit was supported by statements from Henry Hewitt, who had carried out the adaptation, George Stiff, who had illustrated it, and two other authors: Edward Blanchard and George Mudie.

Mudie's affidavit, which was probably written by Lee's counsel, as it is almost identical to that of Blanchard, stated that he was a gentleman

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<sup>520</sup> *Parley's Penny Library*, Vol. 1, p. iv. It was dedicated “to the living Shakespeare, Charles Dickens”.

<sup>521</sup> Frederick D. Kitton, *Dickens and his Illustrators* (1899). For information on cheap literature of this period see also F. Kitton, *The Minor Writings of Charles Dickens* (1900); Marie Léger-St-Jean, *Price One Penny: A Database of Cheap Literature, 1837-1860* (University of Cambridge, 2010-2014, <http://priceonepenny.info>).

<sup>522</sup> E. T. Jaques, *Dickens in Chancery* (1914) provides a thorough account of the court proceedings; but gives off strong whiffs of snobbery, as when Jaques dismisses the credibility of Lee's affidavit because of his poor handwriting: “There is a laborious illiteracy about that ‘Richard Egan Lee’ which speaks for itself.” p. 34.

and former chief editor of *The Sun*, living in Stanhope Street, The Strand, and that his thirty years of literary pursuits had enabled him to form a judgement on the matter in hand. There was no possibility, he opined, that the abridgement could be confused with the original, owing to the differences of thought, style, matter, quality and price. The *Parley's* version, he argued, was aimed at readers who would never be able to afford to buy, or even hire, a copy of the original and, by this process, Dickens's reputation would be enhanced and society benefited. The other affidavits made similar points, but the judge was not impressed, dismissing their case without even calling for a response from Dickens's counsel. Dickens was delighted,<sup>523</sup> but his joy was short-lived as Lee and Haddock, having promised to pay Dickens's costs, promptly declared themselves bankrupt, leaving him to foot the bill of £700.<sup>524</sup> As a result, Dickens developed a jaundiced view of the Chancery Court, which was to later provide the backdrop for *Bleak House*.

The question arises, what led to Mudie's involvement in the case? The answer lies in the names of those against whom Dickens had issued the injunctions in addition to Lee and Haddock: John Cleave, George Berger, William Strange and William Mark Clark. Cleave was a hero of the unstamped press; publisher and distributor of numerous illegal papers, for which he had been fined and imprisoned; one of the founders of NUWC, LWMA and the Chartist movement; a major figure in the cheap literature movement and the original publisher of *Parley's Penny Library*. Lee was another ex-NUWC member and veteran of the unstamped war; arrested at an NUWC rally during which a policeman had been killed, and imprisoned for writing the radical journal, *The Man*. He had worked with Cleave as either printer or co-publisher of the *Parley's* series. Berger, Strange and Clark were long-established publishers and sellers of cheap literature, and had all previously issued plagiarisms of Dickens' works. Cleave and Berger had direct links with Mudie, Cleave having published Mudie's grammar textbook and his letters to the Chambers brothers, while Berger had been one of the publishers of *The Cornucopia Britannica* in 1838.

These men were all representatives of the working-class press that the government had tried for so long to suppress. Although their motives for publishing cheap literature were by no means altruistic, there was a strong political dimension to their activities. Many of the upper and middle classes disapproved of educating the working classes, in case it gave them ideas above their station, and those who did approve wanted education to be channelled into the acquisition of non-threatening "useful knowledge". The publication of cheap literature increased working-class

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<sup>523</sup> "The pirates," wrote Dickens to me, after leaving the court on the 18th of January, "are beaten flat. They are bruised, bloody, battered, smashed, squelched, and utterly undone". J. Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens* (1875).

<sup>524</sup> E.T. Jaques, op. cit.

literacy in a manner that was beyond the control of the authorities.

The full extent of Mudie's involvement with these activities remains unclear, but, with his talent and support for cheap literature, it seems unlikely that it was limited to being drafted into a lawsuit as an "expert witness". One intriguing possibility is that he contributed, anonymously, to *Chambers's London Journal of History, Literature, Poetry, Biography and Adventure*, which appeared weekly between 1841 and 1843. Its title had been lifted from *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, with which it had no connection; its editor was Edward Blanchard, the other literary figure in the Dickens court case, and its publishers were George Berger and William Strange.<sup>525</sup> Given Mudie's association with the publishers and his antipathy to the Chambers brothers, it is hard to believe that he would not have been involved in some way.<sup>526</sup> Even if he was not, he would surely have enjoyed reading the warm press reviews that the *London Journal* received at the expense of its rival, such as:

The Edinburgh work, under the same name (but not the same proprietor), is very inferior to its metropolitan rival. – *Argus*.<sup>527</sup>

Although there is no further evidence of Mudie's public activity during this period, a few glimpses of his private life, and those of his family, are available from Census returns and parish registers. Mudie's eldest sons, Forbes and Robert, both married in 1839, his daughter Jane in 1840, and his sons Charles and David in 1845.<sup>528</sup> All five produced children of their own and Mudie would live to see twenty grandchildren, with a further nine being born after his death. The 1841 Census shows Mudie and his youngest son, David, living at 114 Fetter Lane, near The Strand. His former address at 243½ The Strand, where he had given grammar lessons, was now inhabited by Jane and Robert, with their respective families. Forbes, who had worked with Mudie on *The Edinburgh Cornucopia*, was not mentioned; in 1840 he and his family had emigrated to Australia, where he was killed in a riding accident in 1846.<sup>529</sup> Nor does the Census

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<sup>525</sup> According to Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor (Eds.), *Dictionary of Nineteenth-century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Academia Press, 2009), Berger and Strange even invented a fictitious proprietor of the *Journal*, H. H. Chambers!

<sup>526</sup> If he was, he kept his hand well hidden; the writing style of the *London Journal* does not resemble that of Mudie's publications and there are no articles on political economy.

<sup>527</sup> Advertisement in *The Inventors' Advocate and Journal of Industry*, 2 October 1841.

<sup>528</sup> Parish registers of St Brides, Fleet Street; St John's, Lambeth; St Botolph's, Aldersgate; and St John's, Clerkenwell. Mudie was a witness at the marriages of Jane and Charles.

<sup>529</sup> Private communication from relative of Forbes Mudie.

mention Mudie's wife, Jessy. The date of her death is uncertain,<sup>530</sup> but on 15 September 1844 George Mudie, widower, of 12 Stanhope Street, married Louisa Andow at St Bride's Church, Fleet Street.<sup>531</sup> They would remain together until Mudie's death.

On his marriage certificate, as he had done on his court statement, Mudie described himself as a "Gentleman", but this may well have been to keep up appearances, and to mask the fact that he was actually living in a poverty-stricken area amongst a maze of streets between The Strand and Lincoln's Inn Fields. Stanhope Street was situated near Drury Lane and close to Clare Market: "a squalid retreat for a man of letters" as Jaques put it.<sup>532</sup> A few streets away was Holywell Street, a "narrow dirty lane ... occupied chiefly by old clothesmen and the vendors of low publications",<sup>533</sup> where George Berger had a bookshop and where both Forbes and Jane Mudie had been living at the time of their marriages.<sup>534</sup> Holywell Street was the centre for the publication of scurrilous, vulgar and cheap literature, and would later achieve notoriety for the number of its shops selling indecent or obscene publications. The whole area was viewed with suspicion by respectable society and was eventually pulled down to make way for the wide thoroughfares of Aldwych and Kingsway.<sup>535</sup>

Fetter Lane, where Mudie had worked in 1834 and lived in 1841, was little better, being described in an undated church report as "a labyrinth of business premises", whose inhabitants were "of the poorest and most irreligious class".<sup>536</sup> Even The Strand, one of London's great thoroughfares, was "rapidly degenerating"<sup>537</sup> as its large mansions were being converted into multi-occupancy houses for working-class tenants.<sup>538</sup> The buildings that Mudie lived in during this period of his life would have been old and in a poor state of repair, and the streets he walked, crowded and dirty. The

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<sup>530</sup> A Janet Mudie, of 90 Drury Lane, was buried on 7 December 1834 at the Church of St Mary le Strand, but there can be no certainty that she was Jessy.

<sup>531</sup> Marriage certificate of George Mudie and Louisa Andow.

<sup>532</sup> E. T. Jaques, *op. cit.*

<sup>533</sup> P. Cunningham, *Handbook for London* (1849).

<sup>534</sup> Marriage certificates of Forbes Mudie (1839) and Jane Esplin Mudie (1840)

<sup>535</sup> For a detailed account of Holywell Street in the mid-nineteenth-century, see Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-century London* (Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>536</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *London The Biography* (Chatto and Windus, 2000), p. 235

<sup>537</sup> Thomas Beames, *The Rookeries of London* (1852) p. 17. See also, Lynn MacKay, *Respectability and the London Poor, 1780-1870* (Routledge, 2016)

<sup>538</sup> On the 1841 Census 243½ The Strand was occupied by twenty people in seven different households.

air, polluted by poor sanitation and the discharge of raw sewerage into the nearby River Thames, stank. The whole area was indeed squalid.<sup>539</sup>

At some point during the mid-1840s Mudie moved out of central London, to 23 Parr Street, Hoxton, near New North Road in the East End.<sup>540</sup> Hoxton in the 1840s was the subject of large-scale building development, in effect, a New Town. On an 1846 map, Parr Street, as yet unnamed, contains very few houses, and several other streets in the area are also only partially developed. Another map however, drawn in the late 1850s, shows the whole of Hoxton as fully built-up.<sup>541</sup> It was a working-class area, with row upon row of cheap new dwellings, intended to house the overflow from the nearby slums of Shoreditch and Whitechapel. In time, it would become one of the most socially deprived parts of London, but for Mudie, at least when he first moved in, his house would have been newer, the streets wider, and the air fresher than at any time during the previous decade or so. Nevertheless, Mudie was still very poor, and would later admit to have been

labouring with my hands for a scanty and very precarious subsistence for my family.<sup>542</sup>

Of Mudie's writing nothing further is known until 1848. In that year British radical politics received a shot in the arm from the tumultuous events in France, where the people overthrew King Louis Philippe and established the Second Republic. The French Revolution also rekindled Mudie's political fires. He attempted, unsuccessfully, to rejoin forces with Owen, wrote a stinging critique of the French government's suppression of the working class, and would later play an active part in an attempt to unite the Owenites and Chartists into one progressive force.

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<sup>539</sup> P. Ackroyd, *op. cit.*; E. Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population and on the Means of its Improvement* (1842). For descriptions of areas that were even more squalid, see T. Beames, *op. cit.*

<sup>540</sup> Letters to R. Owen, 25 and 29 August 1848; also, 1851 Census, which shows the building occupied by eight people in three different households.

<sup>541</sup> Cruchley's *New Plan of London*, 1846 ([http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/1846map/1846map\\_linkc.htm](http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/1846map/1846map_linkc.htm)); *Reynolds's Map of Modern London*, 1859 ([http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/1859map/map1859\\_a-1\\_13-24.html](http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/1859map/map1859_a-1_13-24.html)).

<sup>542</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848. See below, Chapter 11.

## The organisation of labour

*I had at one time – that is, for several years,  
almost idolized you. But, I was not a kind  
worshipper.*<sup>543</sup>

Apart from his short-lived *New Benefit Society*, Mudie seems to have dropped out of political activism between 1839 and 1848. *The Book of Murder* had been warmly advertised in the Chartist *Northern Star* and he knew Hetherington and Cleave, both of whom were associated with Chartism through the London Working Men's Association (LWMA). However, William Lovett does not mention him in his list of LWMA active members,<sup>544</sup> while Owenites seem to have kept him at arm's length.<sup>545</sup> He announced his desire to return by writing to Robert Owen, breezily commencing his twelve-page letter by offering

to reunite my efforts with yours in practical endeavours either of the head or hands for promoting the success of actual plans and practical principles for the amelioration of society, and particularly for the improvement of the condition of the working classes of this country.<sup>546</sup>

But if this was an olive branch, it was a thorny one; tact was never Mudie's strong point:

My long estrangement from you was chiefly caused by my dreading the fatal consequences of some of the opinions and doctrines which I thought you unnecessarily and even mischievously worked up with the advocacy of actual co-operation;<sup>547</sup>

Not content with referring to the "fatal consequences" of Owen's opinions, Mudie then recalled that Owen had refused to have him on the council of the Philanthropic Society in 1823, on the grounds that Mudie was "too far advanced in knowledge and in ideas to be useful in such a position!" Their subsequent estrangement had, he said, damaged their cause:

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<sup>543</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 29 August 1848.

<sup>544</sup> W. Lovett, *Life and Struggles* (1876), Vol. 1, p. 96.

<sup>545</sup> See G. Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium*, p. 85; also, Letter to R. Owen, 29 August 1848.

<sup>546</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848, p. 1.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*

I am convinced that, had you co-operated with me, or had encouraged me to persevere in co-operating with you, the cause of co-operation would, many years ago, have been successfully established and triumphant in this country.<sup>548</sup>

Much of Mudie's letter is given over to accounts of his bruising time with Abram Combe at Orbiston, his co-operative activities in Edinburgh and his attempt to reunite with Owen in 1832.<sup>549</sup> In spite of all his setbacks and his long absence from the political arena, his self-belief was still strong:

I believe that I am almost the only man who is now capable of solving, as a Practical Political Economist, in a scientific manner, ... the great and difficult problem of modern civilization – that of how the condition of the labouring classes may be very greatly improved ...<sup>550</sup>

However, by the end of the letter it is clear that Mudie was desperately in need of work:

I am ready to act, either as a missionary, a lecturer, or a writer, or in more than one of these capacities. I understand that you have commenced a new publication in London. If you can give me the printing of that publication, or in any way employ me upon it, as a Compositor, or an Editor, or as both, I shall strain every nerve for its success. I am at present doing nothing, I have been for some time both unemployed and distressed.<sup>551</sup>

If Mudie thought that this was the way to persuade Owen to give him a job he was soon to be disabused. Owen's reply has not been preserved, but Mudie's response to it was furious. It was clear that Owen had denied using the words Mudie had attributed to him and had gone on to say that he had never met anyone whose understanding of his views was even sufficient, let alone "too far advanced". After a rather long-winded assertion that Owen had actually used the words, but only in flattery, Mudie told Owen a few home truths:

Your views and objects, then must be occult indeed! The lessons you have endeavoured to teach must be hopelessly difficult of acquirement! or you yourself must be the most unfortunate and the most incompetent of teachers; since the whole of the civilised world, which for a long time listened and harkened to your teachings both with deference and docility, has not in the

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<sup>548</sup> Ibid. Even if for nothing else, Mudie deserves to be remembered as the man who accused the founder of co-operation of being unco-operative!

<sup>549</sup> See Chapters 7 and 8, above.

<sup>550</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 25 August 1848, p. 11.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.



## The Hidden Oak

long course of about half a century been able to yield you, as you yourself confess, one pupil or coadjutor who is even “yet” sufficiently advanced in real knowledge for your views and objects!<sup>552</sup>

Mudie’s stinging critique was that Owen, by his insistence on linking such things as spade husbandry and community of goods to co-operation, by his abject performance in front of the Commons Select Committee in 1823, and by his refusal to tolerate any rival thinkers within the movement, had fatally damaged the cause of co-operation and turned the movement into a sect. His anger was tempered by great sorrow, as he admitted to his former mentor that he had “at one time – that is, for several years, almost idolized you” and that it gave him

real heartfelt pain to speak this plainly to one who I once fervently admired, esteemed and loved.<sup>553</sup>

However, Mudie’s bitterness boiled over at the end of the letter. Owen, apparently eschewing his lifelong maxim that a person’s character is created for him, not by him, had told Mudie that

it has been your own unfortunate habits that, with your abilities, have kept you in poverty, and while they continue, will keep you so.<sup>554</sup>

Mudie responded to “this most unjust, rude, ungenerous and unfeeling charge” by claiming that he was “leading a strictly sober, regular, and virtuous life, with the virtuous and truly excellent woman to whom I am united”. His choice of words, perhaps, provides a clue to the nature of the habits to which Owen was referring and Mudie acknowledged that he had, unjustly in his view, been cold-shouldered by others within the co-operative movement:

I know that you are not the first who has calumniated me in this respect; but I am ready and eager to prove the truth to you and all others who may think it worth while [sic] to do me this one act of justice, after all the injustice with which I have been treated by parties who, I might reasonably have hoped, would ever have been my friends instead of my enemies, or who, at least, would have shown some degree of regard for real knowledge, before anathematising and consigning to perpetual poverty one who had been ruined by his devotion to that very cause of which they have pretended to be his fellow apostles.<sup>555</sup>

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<sup>552</sup> Letter to R. Owen, 29 August 1848, p. 5

<sup>553</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid., p. 11.



If Owen's comments were accurate, Mudie may have spent much of the 1840s wallowing in self-pity, his fondness for alcohol rendering him unemployed and unemployable. Even if they were not, these letters, together with the ones that he wrote to the Chambers brothers, show Mudie's bitter frustration that his talents seemed unable to lift him out of a life of dire poverty, or even to make a contribution to the cause he passionately believed in.

In spite of the setback of Owen's rejection, Mudie was not deterred. He had told Owen that he had been offered the opportunity of assisting to edit a cheap periodical, in which he would

give that very solution of the problem of reconciling the direct interests of the Working Classes with those of the rest of Society, which I would much rather promulgate in your paper.

The name of this periodical is not known, nor whether it ever saw the light of day. However, the French Revolution of that year gave Mudie the impetus to provide his own solution, in what appears to have been his final pamphlet.

Events in France had moved rapidly throughout 1848. In February the monarchy was replaced by a predominantly middle-class provisional government. Under pressure from the Parisian working class, the government immediately introduced national workshops, which guaranteed work for every man. Elections to the national assembly, based on universal (male) suffrage, took place in April, resulting a large majority for "moderate republicans": liberals and those conservatives who had accepted that the monarchy was over. The assembly handed executive power to a six man executive commission, in effect a collective presidency, which closed down the national workshops in June and ruthlessly suppressed the working-class revolt which followed. The national assembly then dismissed the executive commission and gave power to the military leader, General Cavaignac, who led the government until an election in December. This resulted in Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of the former emperor, becoming president of the republic.

British Chartists and Owenites took great interest in these developments. In particular, the creation of national workshops had raised the question of how work could be organised to ensure that the workers received the full fruits of their labour, and the "organisation of labour" became the subject of much debate. The phrase was taken from a pamphlet *Organisation du travail* (1840), by the French socialist Louis Blanc, which, in language reminiscent of Mudie's, had condemned the free market theories of the British political economists:

... a merciless political economy of which Ricardo has so complaisantly [sic] announced the premises and of which Malthus has drawn with the utmost sangfroid the horrible conclusion. This political economy carried the germ of vice in itself, which will render it fatal to England and to the whole world. It advanced the theory that nothing was of importance but to try to find consumers; it was necessary to add, solvent consumers.<sup>556</sup>

Blanc's thesis was that the state should take over manufacturing industry and organise production in "social workshops", which the workers themselves would collectively control. Capitalists would be able to invest in the workshops and to receive agreed rates of interest, but would not otherwise be entitled to share the profits unless they had become labourers themselves. Existing private industry would be allowed to continue but the government would aim to achieve "its peaceful and successive absorption of private workshops through social ones". Blanc was aware of the inherent dangers of competition between private and public industry and argued, somewhat hopefully, that government intervention would ensure that this would be short-lived:

In this manner instead of being, as every great capitalist is to-day, the master and tyrant of the market, the government would be its regulator. It would use competition as a weapon, not to destroy private industries without consideration, which would be to its own interest to avoid, but to guide them imperceptibly into the new system. Soon, indeed, workmen and capitalists would crowd to every industrial sphere where social workshops are opened, on account of the privileges they offer to their members. After a certain time we could see, how production takes place, without usurpation, without injustice, without irreparable disasters, and for the profit of the principle of association, a phenomenon which is today so deplorably brought forth and only by force of tyranny for the profit of individual egotism. Today a rich manufacturer can strike a heavy blow at his rivals, leave them dead on the spot and monopolize a whole branch of industry; in our system, the State would constitute itself, by and by, as master of industry and in place of monopoly we have obtained, as the result of success, the subversion of competition: association.<sup>557</sup>

As Owen, Mudie and the other Owenites had done twenty years earlier, Blanc staked his faith in scientific discovery, which, under a co-operative rather than a competitive system, would deliver benefits for all:

In the industrial world in which we live, all the discoveries of science are a calamity, first because the machines supplant the labourers who need work

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<sup>556</sup> L. Blanc, *Organisation du Travail* (1st edition, 1840, translated by Marie Paula Dickoré, 1911), Chapter 4.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, Conclusion

to live, and then, because they are also murderous weapons, furnished to industry which has the right and faculty to use them against all those who have not this right and power. What does “new machines” mean in the system of competition? It means monopoly; we have proven it. However, in the new system of association and solidarity there are no patents for inventors, no individual exploitation. The inventor will be recompensed by the State and his discovery is then placed at the service of all. What is to-day a means of extermination, becomes an instrument of universal progress; what to-day reduces the labourer to hunger, to despair and drives him to revolt, will serve only to render his task lighter and to produce a sufficient leisure to live a life of intelligence and happiness, in one word, that which has tolerated tyranny will aid in the triumph of fraternity.<sup>558</sup>

Blanc’s pamphlet was short on detail about how the social workshops would work, but it was very popular, going through nine editions over the following ten years, and *organisation of labour* became one of the key demands of the French working class in February 1848. Blanc was co-opted into the provisional government and it was due to his influence that the government issued its guarantee of the right to work. Socialists, however, were in a small minority within the government and Blanc’s demand for a ministry of labour with executive power to implement his plan for social workshops was refused. Crucially, control over public employment was given to the minister of public works, the moderate republican Pierre Marie, while Blanc was put in charge of an advisory body, the Commission du gouvernement pour les travailleurs.

The national workshops, as set up by Marie’s appointee, Emile Thomas, bore no relation to the social workshops envisaged by Blanc, and any advice from Blanc’s commission was ignored.<sup>559</sup> Workers were employed on programmes of public works, including road building and tree planting, none of which generated any income, nor gave the workers control over their labour. Its allocated budget was enough to employ around 12,000 workers, but soon many times that number had registered. To cover the spiralling costs the government raised taxes, which made the national workshops hugely unpopular with all other sections of French society, including the peasantry, who voted overwhelmingly for anti-socialist candidates in the April elections. The new national assembly decided that it no longer needed the support of the working class, and the government, after some foot dragging, abolished the national workshops on 22 June.

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<sup>558</sup> Ibid.

<sup>559</sup> Thomas later admitted that he had never once spoken to Blanc and that he was hostile to Blanc’s ideas. (Statement by E. Thomas in the *Rapport de la Commission d’Enquête*, 28 June 1848.)

The Parisian workers rose in revolt but were defeated by troops after four days of bloody fighting, in which around 10,000 people were killed or injured.<sup>560</sup>

Mudie's contribution to the debate about the organisation of labour was a thirty-six-page pamphlet, *A Solution of the Portentous Enigma of Modern Civilization, Now Perplexing Republicans as well as Monarchs with Fear of Change*, which he started to write in the autumn of 1848. The pamphlet was originally conceived as a critical response to the book, *Three Months in Power*, by the French poet and politician Alphonse de Lamartine. Lamartine had been a member of both the provisional government and the executive commission and, although he never took the title of prime minister, was widely regarded as the most powerful politician in France between 24 February and 24 June 1848. After he had been ousted from power Lamartine published a book of his speeches and letters (French title, *Trois mois au pouvoir*) as a vindication of his actions while in government. It may also have been an attempt to lay the ground for a political comeback at the presidential election in December, but, if it was, it was without success, as Lamartine came fifth out of five candidates and subsequently retired from politics. Mudie freely admitted that he had intended to use the celebrity of Lamartine's name as a way of drawing attention to his own views (his pamphlet was aimed at a British, not a French, audience) but Lamartine's crushing electoral defeat had caused Mudie to substantially revise what he had written, even though the pamphlet was already at the printer's. The final and only surviving version, which appeared in January 1849, consisted of a fulsome dedication to the new president, Louis Napoleon, a withering criticism of Lamartine's conduct in office, and Mudie's own ideas on how the organisation of labour should be introduced in Britain.

Louis Napoleon had spent most of his life either in exile or in prison, following abortive attempts to reinstate the Bonaparte dynasty. Pledging his loyalty to the republic, he had returned to France in September 1848 and announced his presidential candidature. He traded heavily on his family name, but his appeal reached beyond those who yearned for the stability of the Empire. In his pamphlet, *Extinction du Pauperisme* (1844), he had put forward a plan for the state to force the owners of uncultivated land to rent it to agricultural colonies of poor people, who would gradually become self-sufficient, while the funding for the infrastructure would come from government. His proposals were not dissimilar to those of Louis

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<sup>560</sup> Donald Cope McKay, *The National Workshops: A study in the French Revolution of 1848* (Harvard University Press, 1932) gives a detailed and incisive history of the national workshops. Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850* (originally published as a series of articles in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Revue*, 1850) provides trenchant political comment.

Blanc and Robert Owen, which put him in good stead with the working class and helped him to win a landslide victory, achieving nearly seventy-five per cent of the vote. On the basis of Louis Napoleon's pamphlet, Mudie warmly expressed the hope that the new president would become

the Harbinger of that Golden Age of True Civilization and Happiness for the advent of which Philanthropy has offered up her wishes and her sighs in every nation and era of the world.<sup>561</sup>

Mudie commenced his polemic against Lamartine with one of his trademark attention-grabbing phrases:

The rock upon which you split was the question of the Organization of Labour.<sup>562</sup>

In his book, Lamartine had made great play of the fact that, at the outset of the revolution, he had faced down an angry mob of workers, who were demanding that the provisional government pass legislation to introduce the organisation of labour. He had told the crowd:

I have passed fifteen years of my life in studying this question of the Organization of Labour, as you approve of it; but it has been impossible for me to comprehend it; and I cannot sign that which I do not comprehend.<sup>563</sup>

Lamartine was probably being disingenuous, but Mudie took his words at face value and lambasted him for having the folly to lead a revolution when he did not understand one of its most fundamental features.<sup>564</sup> The labour of the working classes was, he argued, “the source from which the whole of the nutriment of the fabric of society is derived”<sup>565</sup> and, when much of its skilful and productive labour was allowed to remain unemployed, the security of the entire fabric came under threat. The whole purpose of the organisation of labour was to “elevate the Working Classes to that position which, as self-supported members of civilized society, they are justly entitled to occupy”<sup>566</sup> and it was in the interests of all sections of

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<sup>561</sup> G. Mudie, *Portentous Enigma* (1849), p. 5.

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6. Mudie spelt “organisation” with a “z” and this spelling has been used in quotations from his work.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>564</sup> Later in his essay he admitted the possibility that the national workshops may have been “a disingenuous device purposefully contrived to bring any real attempt at the Organization of Labour into disrepute”, a view shared by F. Lasalle, *The French National Workshops of 1848* (printed in *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1863)

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

society that this should happen.

Mudie accused the creators of the national workshops of having no understanding of the principles involved. The workshops were, in his view, the equivalent of the English parochial workhouses,<sup>567</sup> in that, whatever the benevolent intent of their founders, they cost huge amounts of money without generating any income in return. But, he argued, at least the English had been prepared to shoulder the financial burden, resisting attempts by political economists to abolish poor relief, whereas Lamartine, whom he accused of belonging to “the same heartless school”, had after only a few weeks abandoned the idea with

an impatience so fretful, that it induced you deliberately to drench the streets of the capital city of your country with the torrents of French bloodshed in them during the four days of June.<sup>568</sup>

Lamartine’s preparedness to plunge the country into civil war over a question which he claimed not to understand was, for Mudie, unforgivable, all the more so, because he believed that Lamartine *could* have introduced a proper scheme for the organisation of labour had he had the political will to do so. The transition from monarchy to republic had taken place without opposition and the French “with most surprising passiveness and docility” had submitted to the programme of the provisional government. Mudie had no doubt that, had Lamartine recommended the organisation of labour, the French would have followed his lead. But Lamartine, he said, was simply not up to the task:

A most glorious opportunity was presented to you, which you necessarily rejected, because you had not genius to appreciate or even to perceive it. Spiritually blind and deaf, light as vanity, you were tried in the balance and found wanting!<sup>569</sup>

Leaving Lamartine behind, Mudie devoted the rest of his pamphlet to two main themes: a critique of the economic system which had caused the widespread poverty for which an organisation of labour was the only remedy, and his ideas on how such an organisation could be successfully introduced. He attacked the core belief of the orthodox political economists in the infallibility of market forces. In his earlier publications he had demonstrated, he said, that

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<sup>567</sup> Marx, op. cit., used the same term; “English workhouses in the open, that is what these national ateliers were.”

<sup>568</sup> G. Mudie, *Portentous Enigma*, p. 9.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

the entire fabric of the spurious science, which is thus confessedly constructed upon the gratuitous assumption or imaginary basis of the existence of principles for regulating the production, exchange, distribution and consumption of all the goods of life, or the four grand operations of human society, is necessarily as false and unsubstantial as its foundations are real.<sup>570</sup>

Had such natural laws actually existed, he argued:

Poverty would be unknown or unfelt by all human beings who are able and willing to contribute their equitable proportions of labour to the necessary duties of the common-wealth. Difficulties, embarrassments, and ruin, could never overwhelm any but such as recklessly rush upon their own destruction. Abundance would smile upon all who thought fit to reap the blessings awarded by God and nature to virtue and industry. Peace, prosperity, and happiness would everywhere spring up in civilized society, and would rapidly overspread the whole earth.<sup>571</sup>

But there were no natural laws; instead, there were principles that restrained production, consumption, exchange and distribution, and which prevented the possibility of sufficient food, or any other essential commodity, ever being produced. These principles were the dogma of a “theoretically false and spurious science, teaching error alone, and productive only of the prolongation of the worst national evils”, which he contrasted with an alternative economic theory, “whose very first lessons teach the means of banishing poverty for ever from the abodes of mankind, and of removing others of the worst evils of civilized society”.<sup>572</sup>

Mudie hammered home the point that economic theories seriously affect people’s lives:

These most momentous and strictly vital questions (vital, because they involve, now and ultimately, the very lives of countless multitudes of human beings, and a really incalculable amount of human misery or happiness), depend essentially upon the comparative truth or falsehood of the fundamental principles, which, widely asunder as opposite extremes can be, have been stated as those of the two schools in political science or social economy now under investigation. It is therefore of the very highest importance that every member of civilized society shall thoroughly understand the nature of the conflicting principles of the two schools, and the stupendous consequences,

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<sup>570</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

for good or for evil, which must necessarily flow from the triumph of the one over the other.<sup>573</sup>

The living conditions of the poor, Mudie said, were a direct consequence of the economic theories of the political economists. When insufficient food is produced, some people will die, but many more will go permanently hungry; making them less strong and healthy, and prone “to almost every form of both chronic and acute malignant disease”. Furthermore, the other essentials of life were also insufficiently produced, with disastrous consequences:

hence the crowded and unhealthful abodes into which the poor cram themselves, and hence, inevitably, their wretched and often total destitution of comfortable or even decent clothing, beds, bedding, fuel, and the most humble articles of domestic convenience and furnishing, as well as food, of all of which, if they are not wholly destitute, it is absolutely impossible for them to obtain more than mere fractional and most miserably short portions.<sup>574</sup>

In spite of the poverty around them, he said, the complacent believers in market forces still thought they had produced too much, not too little:

long before enough of anything had been produced for supplying the wants of the whole people, by far too much has already been produced for the interest of the parties who employ the labour and capital required for the production. If those producers go on producing more than very insufficient quantities of any commodity, they are soon checked by the ruin and low prices which an approach towards abundant production infallibly entails upon themselves!<sup>575</sup>

To illustrate his point, Mudie referred to the events of 1818-1819, when abundant harvests had led to a drop in food prices, which in turn had caused agricultural and manufacturing distress. The then prime minister had said that “distress was caused by abundant harvests!” and

as if in heartless mockery of the people at large, they were exhorted to wait patiently until production should recede to the actual and always most wretchedly RESTRICTED level of the people’s power of consuming, or until the people’s power of consuming food should become adequate to the powers of producing it.<sup>576</sup>

However, he said, an equalisation of consuming and producing power

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<sup>573</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid., p. 19. Mudie wrote the whole of this paragraph in capital letters.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid., p. 21. Mudie had used this example before; see *The Economist* No. 3



would be impossible without government regulation of the market, to “adjust and equalise the stupendously unequal, irregular, and ever fluctuating powers of producing and consuming, or of Demand and Supply”.<sup>577</sup> One such adjustment, Mudie suggested, would be for the government to inject £50 million per year into the economy, to be added to the wages of working-class people. The extra money would be spent on buying more and better food, housing and all the other essentials, which, in turn, would boost production and generate greater income for producers.<sup>578</sup>

But at the centre of Mudie’s plan was the organisation of labour, which would enable working-class people to support themselves by their own labour. The government would fund the self-sufficient communities which he and the rest of the co-operative movement had been advocating for thirty years. These would produce their own food, clothing, furniture, tools, machinery, and home improvements. For Mudie, it was crucial for the survival of these communities that they did not threaten the interests of other sections of society; therefore they must not enter into competition with productive capitalists,

in consequence of the determined opposition and hostility which it could not fail to encounter from all the powerful parties who would be deeply and indeed vitally interested in defeating it.<sup>579</sup>

The failure of the French to understand this principle, he said, had caused the downfall of the national workshops.<sup>580</sup> He took great pains to exclude from his plans the possibility of competition; the communities would not normally be permitted to sell their produce on the open market. However, he recognised that such activities might at some point become unavoidable; for example, to pay for imported foreign goods. Mudie regarded such things as mere frippery, the result of

artificially acquired tastes and habits, rather than to what is truly requisite for utility, or for real comfort and happiness,<sup>581</sup>

and expressed the hope that the desire for imported commodities would be minimal. More serious, he thought, was the possibility that communities might be forced to sell their produce in order to pay rent, taxes, interest on

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<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid. Mudie did not elaborate on this point; the national workshops did not compete directly with productive capitalists, but their programme of public works had been funded by increased taxation, which alienated the rest of French society.

<sup>581</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

loans and the eventual purchase of land. His solution was for the government (rather than private capital) to take all the debts of the communities on to itself and allow the communities to discharge those debts by means of services rendered, such as taking responsibility for maintaining the paupers in their parish.

It was equally important, in Mudie's opinion, to avoid friction between the inhabitants of the communities, as this would threaten their effectiveness, even their survival. To this end, equality of profits and community of goods were to be eschewed; committees of workers would rank the contribution that each person made to the community and allocate rewards commensurate with its value. Widows, orphans and the old, sick or infirm would be looked after within the community, but any former members of the unproductive classes would have to realise that "the very continuance of their lives must depend upon their making some degree of exertion".<sup>582</sup> They would be grouped together and given "light and easy", but lowly rewarded, duties until such time as they demonstrated that they could pull their weight:

As they become cured of the vices of indolence or listless indifference, these unhappy persons will of course be entitled to claim promotion and removal to another and more productive establishment.<sup>583</sup>

According to Mudie, the issues of competition, equality of profits and community of goods had been the "sunken rocks" which had wrecked Owen's plan when he presented it to Parliament, causing him to abandon the Motherwell project and take himself off to America. In spite of their recent acrimonious correspondence, Mudie praised the "most prominent and brilliant part" that Owen had played in developing British Philanthropy but criticised his reliance on undercutting other producers:

No man could have made greater or more persevering and long continued efforts for the success of views which he doubtless believed were in all respects accurate. Neither he, however, nor his successors in this country, the Socialists, had any other dependence for the maintenance of their associations, than, by means of cheap production, underselling all other producers and dealers in the markets. They dreamt of curing the evils of excessive competition by a competition still more rigorous and extreme.<sup>584</sup>

With the government funding the means of production, the working

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<sup>582</sup> Ibid., p. 23. Mudie had railed against unproductive consumers in earlier publications – see above, Chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

classes themselves would provide the demand; a demand which the present system did not meet. For Mudie, the needs of working-class people provided “a market that can never fail”, the supply of which could not possibly affect the interests of any other portion of the nation. And, with an indication of how he saw the main philosophical differences between Owen and himself, Mudie stressed that his plan was based on practical, not visionary, thinking:

It may be said that this scheme of Organized Labour is too truly a matter of mere common sense and practical business to be worthy of more than the most transient consideration. There is no deep and subtle philosophy to impress, no brilliant flight of imagination to interest and delight, no novelty in morals to captivate, no proposed change in forms of government or politics to arouse, no lofty speculations in theology to startle the minds of men.

Be it so. Neither, however, is there any philosophic sophistry to bewilder, any poetry to dazzle, any immorality to corrupt, any political meddling to exasperate, nor any daring or impious pretension to fathom the mysteries of God or to settle religious controversies, only, of course, to shock and revolt the feelings of society at large.<sup>585</sup>

The *Portentous Enigma* contains some vintage Mudie and provides a valuable summary of his economic and social ideas. His views had not radically changed over the years and the examples he chose to illustrate them were ones that he had used in much earlier publications. He was still totally opposed to laissez-faire economics, as well as to Malthus's population theory;<sup>586</sup> and he held fast to his belief in co-operative communities, in spite of the collapse of the official Owenite community at Queenwood.<sup>587</sup> The role of the state received greater prominence than before, Mudie urging the government to make war on poverty and to use legislation to direct under-utilised capital to get unemployed labour back to work. The crushing of the French working class and the failure of British Chartism<sup>588</sup> may have led Mudie to doubt whether the working class was capable of improving its lot without help from middle-class shopkeepers, tradesmen and small business owners, who were also affected by economic depression:

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<sup>585</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., p. 32. He mentioned Malthus only briefly, and treated him less savagely than he had ten years earlier; simply ascribing Malthus's theory to his mistaking the restraining principle for natural laws.

<sup>587</sup> See below, Chapter 12.

<sup>588</sup> See below, Chapter 12.

These are a bolder, more determined, and in some respects more intelligent as well as more impatient class of men than the operatives. They are much more accustomed to inquire into and reason upon public affairs than men of the working classes. They are always, therefore, more ripe for agitation, and have more means, leisure, aptitude, power, and confidence for acting in concert, in order to effect a given object, than the working classes. They are more than a counterbalance to the working classes when they are opposed to them; but everything warrants the conclusion that they can at any time draw the working classes along with them for a purpose of expressing public discontent or of exciting a dangerous disaffection. Such a coalition of the middle and working classes is sure to be truly formidable, as was recently proved by the attainment of the reform of the British House of Commons, and by the French revolution of February, 1848. At all events, he must be a bold statesman who would hazard a conflict with their combined energies.<sup>589</sup>

This weakness of the working class, and its dependence upon others to give it a helping hand, may also account for what appears to be a moderation of Mudie's message, compared with his writings of the mid-1820s and 1830s. Ignoring the huge contribution of the working-class press, and implying a more Owenite, paternalistic approach to improving social conditions, he assigned the leading role in opposing orthodox political economy to

a noble phalanx of enlightened and practical philanthropists, who have long maintained a steady and unyielding resistance to the heartless dogmas and unfeeling propositions of the pseudo Political Economists respecting the more unfortunate portions of society, and who have recently gained an important victory over them by obtaining a relaxation of certain harsh measures in the treatment of the parochial poor, which they had prevailed upon the legislature to adopt.<sup>590</sup>

And, in a somewhat whimsical passage, he contemplated how organised labour should relate with the rest of society, saying that it was "the youngest and last provided for offspring of Civilization" and should "cheerfully comply with the established family regulations and usages". He presented the working class as non-threatening, almost forelock-touching, and forever cheerful:

So long as working men can obtain employment at wages that enable them and their families to live, they are generally contented, if not happy. The same working men, when enjoying the security, the abundance, and the moral and intellectual sunshine attainable from Organized Labour, would, I believe it

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<sup>589</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid., p. 17. Mudie did not specify what "harsh measures" had been relaxed.

is not too much to assume, cheerfully shed their blood in defence of those enabling them to obtain so many blessings.<sup>591</sup>

Either he was mellowing in his old age or was deliberately toning down his message to appeal to the middle classes. But whatever his misgivings about the strength of the working class, he fully supported its right to organise its own labour and saw his future in helping it to achieve that goal. Indefatigable to the last, he planned another series of lectures:

Finally – and to return for a moment to the subject of Organized Labour:- Though, in advocating the Organization of Labour, I have carefully proposed to guard all the other national interests from being injuriously affected by the creation of a new power that could outstrip all competitors, and have even suggested conditions to which the Organization should subscribe, if it be formed with the capital of the public, and under the authority of the state, yet I am fully aware that the working classes have the power of Organizing their own Labour with their own means, in which case they will of course be as free and unfettered to pursue their own lawful interest in their own way as all their fellow subjects. In a course of lectures, which I am about to deliver, I intend to show and explain to the working classes the certain means whereby successive portions of them may speedily achieve the Organization of their own Labour. These lectures I shall be ready to repeat, if called upon to do so, to trade societies or other bodies of the working classes in all parts of the kingdom. In the lectures, the entire subject, which is but little more than touched upon in the preceding pages, will be fully developed and discussed.<sup>592</sup>

All other accounts of Mudie's life finish at this point. During the course of this research, however, further evidence of his activities has come to light, placing him amongst those who tried to breathe life into the corpses of Chartism and Owenism. To put these events into context, it is necessary to provide a brief resumé of the activities of the two movements.

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<sup>591</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

## Friends of progress

*It is in our power to produce at least  
£200 million worth more of wealth than is at  
present produced in this country.*<sup>593</sup>

After the collapse of the GNCTU and the labour exchanges in 1834, Owen and his followers concentrated on proclaiming the advent of the “new moral world”, where “Truth, Knowledge, Union, Industry and Moral Good now take the field, and openly advance against the united powers of Falsehood, Ignorance, Dis-Union and Moral Evil”.<sup>594</sup> In Frank Podmore’s words:

[Owen’s] two primary aims were the reconstitution of the religious and ethical codes of the world on a new basis – the non-responsibility of the individual for his character and actions; and the reconstruction of the social system.<sup>595</sup>

As noted previously, a few small co-operative trading societies still existed, but Owen dismissed these as irrelevant to his plan and concentrated on promulgating his core messages of communitarianism and moral regeneration. To achieve his ends he set up a newspaper, *The New Moral World*, as well as an educational and fund-raising organisation, which underwent frequent changes of name, starting with the Association of All Classes of All Nations and ending up as the Rational Society.<sup>596</sup> Education, in the form of Sunday schools, evening classes, lectures and sermons, took place in purpose-built lecture halls, known as “Halls of Science”, which the Owenites erected in several of the larger cities. Because of their concentration on social, as opposed to political, issues, the Owenites were widely referred to as socialists.

Owen’s movement began to resemble a quasi-religious sect, albeit of a secularist nature; its regional organisers were known as social missionaries, it had its own *Book of Social Hymns* to be sung at meetings, and it held children’s naming ceremonies instead of baptisms. The efforts of the social missionaries paid dividends: by 1840 Owen’s supporters could

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<sup>593</sup> *The Weekly Tribune*, 2 March 1850; speech by George Mudie to National Regeneration Society.

<sup>594</sup> *The New Moral World*, Vol. I, No. 1 (1 November 1834)

<sup>595</sup> F. Podmore, *op.cit.*, p.579.

<sup>596</sup> Also, the Missionary Tract Society, National Community Friendly Society, Universal Community Society of Rational Religionists and the Home Colonization Society. Some of these were sub-divisions of the main body.

claim that his movement had over sixty branches, that at least 50,000 people regularly attended the Sunday meetings across the country, and that sufficient funds had been raised to pay over £20,000 to erect the Halls of Science.<sup>597</sup> But the socialists had enemies too. The established Church had been wary of Owen since his attacks on organised religion twenty years earlier, but during the 1830s Owen had strongly criticised the institution of marriage, particularly the subjugation of wives.<sup>598</sup> This provoked a strong response: virulent attacks on Owen and his “infidel” supporters appeared in the press, Owenite speakers were physically attacked and the Bishop of Exeter tried to persuade the government to hold an enquiry into socialism, with a view to banning it. The government refused and the Owenites survived, but the hostility of the anti-socialist propaganda dented support for Owen’s ideas.

The Owenites’ dream of a community was realised in 1839, when they took out a lease on the Queenwood estate, at East Tytherley, Hampshire.<sup>599</sup> Numerically, the size of the Queenwood community was barely larger than that of Spa Fields; the maximum recorded numbers of inhabitants were fifty-four adults and thirty-six children.<sup>600</sup> Its farmland was of poor quality and the remoteness of its location prevented it from setting up manufacturing businesses. However, it survived for six years on loans from the Owenite fund-raising branches, making it the most long-lasting of all the co-operative communities. Owen himself blew hot and cold about the project. At times, he was actively involved as governor, committing funds to the construction of a large building, called Harmony Hall, which was to provide accommodation and a school. On other occasions he distanced himself, even to the point of resigning as president of the Rational Society when some of its members criticised his actions, and he was in America throughout the final year of Queenwood’s existence. The cost of Harmony Hall proved to be the community’s undoing. Owen had spent lavishly on extravagant fixtures and fittings, thereby saddling the community with debts which they could not repay. Queenwood limped on until the middle of 1845, when its governing body decided that enough was enough, and the community was dissolved.

The implosion of its flagship community knocked the stuffing out of

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<sup>597</sup> *The New Moral World*, Vol. VIII, No. 1 (4 July 1840).

<sup>598</sup> Following Thompson’s lead, Owen had advocated complete sexual equality and easier divorce; see R. Owen, *Lectures on the Marriage of the Priesthood in the Old Immoral World* (1835) and B. Taylor, *op. cit.*

<sup>599</sup> Accounts of the Queenwood community are to be found in Edward Royle, *Robert Owen and the Commencement of the Millennium: A Study of the Harmony Community* (Manchester University Press 1998); R.G. Garnett, *op. cit.*; J. F. C. Harrison, *op. cit.*; F. Podmore, *op. cit.*

<sup>600</sup> *Report to Congress of the Rational Society*, y/e 30 April 1845; see E. Royal, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

Owen's organisation. Membership of the Rational Society dwindled and branches refused to commit funds to new activities until the financial affairs of Queenwood were finally settled, a process which would take many years. Owen, now in his mid-seventies, continued to correspond with politicians and aristocrats about ways of relieving the distress of the poor, and stood for Parliament in 1847, but withdrew his nomination before the election. His immediate disciples were still loyal to him, but, as a campaigning force, Owenism was now moribund.

Ironically, the one part of the Owenite movement that flourished was the activity that Owen had the least time for: co-operative trading stores. In 1844 the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers was founded. Its objectives included establishing a store, employing members who were out of work, building houses where members could live collectively and, in the long-term,

to establish a self-supporting home-colony of united interests, or assist other Societies in establishing such colonies.<sup>601</sup>

This was the same model as that used by Mudie at Spa Fields, Dr King in Brighton, and hundreds of other working class co-operative societies of the early 1830s. But this time around it survived and prospered; the modern Co-op was born.<sup>602</sup>

Turning now to Chartism, the movement was a continuation of the radicals' struggle to achieve political power for working-class people. The 1832 Reform Act had excluded the working class from the democratic process and the Whig government made it clear that they had no intention of ever widening the franchise. Working-class agitation for political reform continued in the pages of the unstamped press and in 1836 a new organisation, the London Working Men's Association (LWMA), was founded as a campaigning force on behalf of working-class people. The LWMA drew up a list of six demands for political reform: universal adult male suffrage; annual parliamentary elections; secret ballots; equally-sized electoral districts; abolition of the property qualification for MPs; and payment of MPs. In consultation with other groups of working-class activists across the country, these demands were gradually incorporated into a draft bill, to be presented to Parliament in the form of a petition:

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<sup>601</sup> *Objects of the Rochdale Pioneers; Statutes of 1844*. The idea of colonies was later dropped.

<sup>602</sup> A detailed history and analysis of the Rochdale Pioneers is Brett Fairbairn, *The Meaning of Rochdale: The Rochdale Pioneers and the Co-operative Principles* (Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan, 1994, <http://usaskstudies.coop>).



the “People’s Charter”.<sup>603</sup>

In the early years, the Chartists were a loose confederation of local organisations. Although these groups agreed on the content of the Charter and its primacy over all other issues, there were sharp differences of opinion as to how the campaign should be conducted. Several of the founders of the LWMA, including William Lovett, James Watson, Henry Hetherington and John Cleave, came from the artisan end of the working class. They had been active in the now defunct National Union of the Working Classes, as well as being heavily involved in the “war of the unstamped”. They believed in the power of argument and persuasion, and became known as “moral force Chartists”. Others believed that the argument should be backed up by threats of violence. The leader of these “physical force Chartists” was Feargus O’Connor, and his newspaper, *The Northern Star*, became the dominant voice within Chartism.

The Charter was launched in 1838 and leading Chartists collected signatures for the petition at mass meetings up and down the country. By the time the petition was laid before Parliament in 1839, 1.3 million people had signed, but Parliament threw it out. A wave of strikes and riots followed, including a serious clash at Newport which resulted in the deaths of twenty-four Chartists. Most of the Chartist leaders, even moral force ones such as William Lovett, were imprisoned for making seditious speeches.

The incarceration of its leaders did nothing to heal the rifts that had developed within Chartism. In the wake of the disappointments of 1839, many Chartists gave serious thought to how the movement should progress. Some suggested that it should become more Christian in outlook, Christian socialist in fact; others, that Chartists should ally themselves to the burgeoning temperance movement; while Lovett was co-author of a manifesto proposing the foundation of working-class educational establishments, not unlike Owen’s Halls of Science.<sup>604</sup> For their pains, the instigators of these ideas were subjected to virulent personal attacks in the pages of *The Northern Star* by O’Connor and his supporters, who condemned them as traitors to Chartism.

Internal strife flared up again during the 1841 general election, over the question of which candidates to support. Lovett, and others from the LWMA, proposed that Chartists should throw their weight behind any candidate who was prepared to support the Charter, such as middle-class

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<sup>603</sup> For histories of Chartism, see R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement* (1854); J. West, *History of the Chartist Movement* (1920); D. Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (Ashgate, 1986); M. Chase, *Chartism: a New History* (Manchester University Press, 2007). For O’Connor’s version of events, see *The Northern Star* (1837-1852).

<sup>604</sup> W. Lovett and J. Collins, *Chartism: New Organization of the People* (1840)

radicals and liberal Whigs. O'Connor, however, argued that the Whigs had betrayed the working class in 1832 and should be removed from power, thereby indicating support for Tory candidates who were implacably opposed to the Charter. A third position emanated from Bronterre O'Brien,<sup>605</sup> who stated that working-class interests were diametrically opposed to those of both the upper and middle classes and, therefore, Chartists should not make alliances with either Tories or Whigs. Instead, they should put up their own candidates, who would be ineligible to become MPs, and use the election for propaganda purposes. O'Connor's view prevailed, Lovett and O'Brien were marginalised and O'Connor became the undisputed leader of the movement. The Tories won the election, but if they had any gratitude for Chartist support they did not show it. In a re-run of the events of 1839, a second version of the Charter was presented to Parliament in 1842, this time with over 3 million signatures. It was rejected by an overwhelming majority, a wave of strikes ensued and the year ended with hundreds of Chartists in prison.

For the next five years agitation for the Charter all but ceased, as O'Connor threw his energies into the Chartist Land Plan, with the idea of raising funds to purchase parcels of land. O'Connor had been impressed by the Queenwood community, but his Land Plan was not an exercise in Owenite socialism. Once a person had subscribed enough to purchase a share, his name would be entered into a lottery, whose winners would be allocated their own cottage and smallholding. The scheme was popular: by 1848 it had 70,000 subscribers and the Chartist Land Company had bought five estates, which housed about 250 families. However, organisational problems and lax accounting procedures, which would cause the project's demise, had already surfaced. The Company had failed to meet the criteria for registration as either a friendly society or a joint-stock company and would eventually be ruled illegal by a House of Commons Select Committee.

The events in France of February 1848 jolted Chartism back to life. A new Charter petition was quickly organised and a mass demonstration on Kennington Common was planned for 10 April, with the intention of marching on Parliament to deliver it. Although O'Connor had claimed that the march would be non-violent, the British state was determined to crush the demonstration. Police, with troops and special constables in reserve, sealed off the River Thames bridges and told O'Connor that only he and a handful of supporters would be allowed to deliver the petition. To the disappointment of many Chartists, O'Connor complied and the

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<sup>605</sup> O'Brien had been editor of Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian* and was one of the most original political thinkers within Chartism. Originally on the physical force wing, he fell out with O'Connor over electoral policy.

petition was duly delivered. O'Connor claimed that 5.7 million people had signed it, but House of Commons clerks declared that there were fewer than 2 million signatures, many of which were in false names. Although the accuracy of these figures was challenged, O'Connor's credibility was fatally damaged and the Chartist movement never recovered.

Although many Chartists were also socialists and vice versa, the two organisations remained frostily separate throughout the 1840s. The official line from the Chartists' governing body, the National Charter Association (NCA), was that nothing should be allowed to distract the campaign for the Charter; social reform could be considered later. Owen's views on religion, marriage and community of property were also stumbling blocks. On the other side, the socialists abhorred the violence of the language used by O'Connor and his allies, and in their heart of hearts, they did not really see the need for universal suffrage, believing that Owen's system would work under any type of government. It was not until after the French Revolution of 1848 that tentative steps would be taken to see if the two movements could unite around a common programme.<sup>606</sup>

August 1849 saw the formation of an organisation called the National Association of all Classes of the British and Irish People for the Regeneration, Prosperity and Happiness of Society. At a public meeting it invited plans and ideas for the "general amelioration of the condition of the people" and set up a committee to examine any such plan, with a view to submitting it to Parliament. The chair of the committee was Luke J. Hansard and its secretary was George Mudie.<sup>607</sup>

The committee took several months to produce its report, which it then presented for debate at weekly public meetings in March and April 1850. The report itself does not seem to have survived and the resolutions discussed at the meetings only refer to it by line and page numbers. However, the programme that it advocated can be deduced from the individuals involved and the other organisations to which they belonged.

The name of the association had an Owenite ring to it, and the shortened title by which it was referred to in the press, National Regeneration Society (NRS), echoed the name of the organisation that Owen and the trade unions had launched in 1833.<sup>608</sup> Three of Owen's former social missionaries, Alexander Campbell, Lloyd Jones and Robert Buchanan, spoke at NRS meetings in support of its aims; Campbell was one of the committee and assisted Hansard in presenting the report. Owen himself

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<sup>606</sup> G. Claeys, *Citizens and Saints*, pp. 208-284, provides a detailed account of the relationship between Chartism and socialism from the mid-1830s to early 1850s.

<sup>607</sup> *The London Daily News*, 27 August 1849; *The Weekly Tribune*, 2 March to 6 April 1850.

<sup>608</sup> National Regeneration Committee; see above, Chapter 8, n. 56.

attended, promising to submit a plan of his own if none better was forthcoming. Campbell, Jones and Buchanan were also founder members of the League of Social Progress (LSP), – a socialist, post-Owenite, group, – and of its successor, the Social Reform League (SRL). They were also closely associated with three journals, *The Spirit of the Age*, *The Spirit of the Times* and *The London Weekly Tribune*, which acted as mouthpieces for the two groups.<sup>609</sup>

These publications show the Owenite socialists moving out of Owen's shadow and becoming receptive to the ideas of the 1848 Revolution. *The Spirit of the Times* devoted more column inches to Louis Blanc than to any other writer, printing his *History of the French Revolution* in weekly instalments, as well as his *Letters on Social Reform*. The idea that the organisation of labour needed the full backing of the state in order to succeed seems to have taken root; as had its corollary, that political reform would be necessary to ensure that the state acted in the interests of working-class people. The socialist groups were now committed to universal manhood suffrage, the organisation of labour in industrial workshops and agricultural colonies, compulsory education, freedom of religion and the abolition of capital punishment.<sup>610</sup>

The National Regeneration Society meetings were not the exclusive property of the socialists. Samuel Kydd, who had until recently been the secretary of the National Charter Association, expressed his full support for the aims of the NRS. Kydd also gave public lectures on the organisation of labour, and in his speech he stressed the importance of government regulation.<sup>611</sup> The NRS committee included Walter Cooper: a Chartist, Christian socialist and supporter of the temperance movement, who alarmed some in the audience by including in a resolution the accusation that "many of our human rulers ... have been traitors to their trust, to their fellow-creatures, and to their God".<sup>612</sup> In fact, many of the speakers, as reported by *The Weekly Tribune*, made reference to the importance of Christianity to their political and social beliefs. Socialism appeared to be

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<sup>609</sup> The three journals ran consecutively; *The Spirit of the Age* (1 Jul 1848 to 3 Mar 1849), *The Spirit of the Times* (10 Mar 1849 to 29 Sep 1849) and *The Weekly Tribune* (6 Oct 1849 to 6 Jul 1850) and can be viewed as one continuous whole. Buchanan was editor of at least the first two, Campbell was a financial backer, as well as contributing the occasional letter, while Lloyd Jones contributed numerous lengthy articles.

<sup>610</sup> *The Spirit of the Age*, 1 July 1848; *The Spirit of the Times* 30 September 1849.

<sup>611</sup> *The Weekly Tribune*, 2 March 1850. Kydd had resigned his post, not for political reasons, but because he felt that the NCA had ceased to function as a national association; *The Northern Star*, 27 October 1849.

<sup>612</sup> *The Weekly Tribune*, 30 March 1850. On Owen's suggestion, the resolution was amended to omit this passage.

trying to shed its “infidel” image.

Another Chartist, Bronterre O’Brien, also put in an appearance at one of the NRS meetings; and virtually hijacked its agenda. O’Brien was one of Chartism’s “big beasts”, but had been marginalised by O’Connor some years previously and had spent most of the 1840s sniping at the leadership in newspaper articles. When O’Connor’s influence began to wane after the debacle at Kennington Common, O’Brien re-emerged and made regular speeches from Chartist platforms. He also founded the National Reform League (NRL) to propagandise his ideas on social reform, which included land nationalisation, replacement of the New Poor Law with one based on the Old Poor Law principles, exchange bazaars in every town in order to supersede competition, a national credit system, the transfer of the burden of the national debt to the landowning classes (in whose interests it had been contracted) and revaluation of the currency. He emphasised that all of these reforms assumed that the principles of the Charter had been introduced. This was the agenda that O’Brien persuaded an NRS meeting, by an overwhelming majority, to adopt. O’Brien later hinted that he was aware that he may have pushed the NRS further than it had really wanted to go,<sup>613</sup> but in fact his ideas were not a million miles away from those of the Social Reform League, one of whose leaders, Lloyd Jones, was also a founder member of O’Brien’s NRL.

The NRS Chairman, Luke James Hansard, seemed equally at home in socialist, Chartist and Christian circles. Grandson of the founder of the parliamentary publishing house, Hansard was a Christian philanthropist who prided himself on treating his employees fairly.<sup>614</sup> He was an active campaigner for social reform, chairing meetings, making speeches and donating funds to such causes as the Society for the Protection of Young Females, the Distressed Needlewomen’s Society, the United Patriots and Patriarchs Benefit Societies and a fund for building almshouses for “decayed printers”; which is, perhaps, how he came to know Mudie.<sup>615</sup> But Hansard showed political fire as well as worthy generosity. At a fund-raising meeting for the families of two Chartists who had died of cholera while in prison, he shared the platform with several members of the NCA executive and made an impassioned speech, referring to the men as “self-sacrificing devoted patriots”, rather than seditious criminals, and defending the rights of working men to loudly campaign for improving

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<sup>613</sup> *The Northern Star*, 30 March 1850.

<sup>614</sup> *The Northern Star*, 26 September 1846.

<sup>615</sup> *The Northern Star*, 9 May 1846; 19 December 1846; 26 June 1847; 28 December 1845.

their standard of living.<sup>616</sup> He also forged links with the unions, joining the journeymen bakers' campaign for a reduction in working hours and even speaking in support of strike action by typesetters in a dispute over wage cuts.<sup>617</sup>

The NRS meetings, then, featured a good number of high-profile social and political reformers. But the most evocative name associated with the movement was that of Thomas Preston. Preston was a true working-class hero: the authentic voice of English republicanism, whose political activities spanned nearly sixty years. He had been a member of the Jacobin-inspired London Corresponding Society during the 1790s. As one of the leaders of the Spencean Philanthropists he had played a major role in the planned insurrection at Spa Fields in 1816, for which he had been charged with high treason, only escaping prosecution when the Crown's case against a fellow conspirator collapsed. He continued his revolutionary activities by joining the Cato Street Conspiracy, for which he could very easily have been hanged, but the prosecution did not want to disclose the evidence of police spies and so the case against him was dropped.<sup>618</sup> He had been, in fact, one of those against whom Mudie, in his days as an attack-dog for *The Leeds Intelligencer*, had written trenchant editorials, accusing them of stirring up disaffection amongst the working classes.

Preston, however, developed links with the socialists, and during the 1830s he became an activist in the NUWC, with a strong interest in land redistribution, education and currency reform. With the advent of Chartism he joined the East London Democratic Association, a physical force rival to the more moderate LWMA, but as his years advanced and his health declined he took a lower profile. In the 1840s he had written a pamphlet advocating land taxes and compulsory levies on those in work in order to create a public fund to pay pensions to those too old or sick to earn a living; a proto-national insurance system. It was a version of this "Prestonian Plan" that had formed the basis of the meetings, chaired by Hansard, that led to the formation of the National Regeneration Society.<sup>619</sup> Preston was, by this time, well into his seventies and barely spoke at the NRS meetings, the importance of his part in the proceedings only becoming clear in a fulsome tribute by *The Northern Star*, after his death in June 1850. At his funeral, Hansard gave the eulogy and placed a

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<sup>616</sup> *The Northern Star*, 1 December 1849. The NCA members present were George Reynolds, Thomas Clark and Phillip McGrath.

<sup>617</sup> *The Northern Star*, 2 June 1849; 24 August 1850.

<sup>618</sup> M. Chase, Thomas Preston (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*); I. Protheroe, op. cit.; E. P. Thompson, op. cit.

<sup>619</sup> *The Northern Star*, 31 October 1840; 18 January 1845; *The Geelong Advertiser*, 6 December 1849; *The Weekly Tribune*, 2 March 1850.

copy of the Prestonian Plan on the coffin.<sup>620</sup>

As secretary of the NRS, Mudie's duties would have been mainly behind the scenes: taking the minutes, circulating reports and publicising the meetings by newspaper advertisements, in which he announced the names of the various "friends of progress" who would be speaking. His only recorded speech, the last he is known to have made in public, was brief. He said that his forty years in the newspaper industry and thirty-four considering the social problems under discussion had led him to conclude that it was in the power of the nation to produce at least £200 million more in wealth than it was currently producing. When this figure was questioned, Mudie replied, in *The Economist* mode, that estimates of the value of the nation's annual produce varied between £300 million and £1,000 million. If you took the mean of those estimates (which was £600 million) and accepted that there was always at least one third of the workforce unemployed, then by putting all the unemployed back to work, productivity would be increased by one third. He concluded with a sideswipe at the economic free-traders and support for government intervention:

if only £50,000,000 of that went among the labourers as wages, it would do more to improve them than all the foreign markets that could possibly be opened up to this country. In order to give effect to such plans, there ought to be a power of the Government as that proposed by the resolution.<sup>621</sup>

The NRS meetings, as reported in the press,<sup>622</sup> included some rather long-winded debates on abstract principles, such as "whether pauperism, poverty and crime were the results of the Divine will, or the ignorance, mis-government and neglect of man, acting through human governments".<sup>623</sup> However, it does appear that the NRS was attempting to reach across the political divide and to synthesise elements of Owenite, Chartist and Christian socialist thinking. It committed itself to, amongst other things, universal suffrage, government-sponsored organisation of labour and an embryonic welfare state. Momentum for unity of the various groups around a common programme seemed to be growing, and later that year a conference was called to discuss how that could be achieved. It was attended by delegates from the National Charter Association, the Social

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<sup>620</sup> *The Northern Star*, 8, 15 and 31 August 1850

<sup>621</sup> *The Weekly Tribune*, 2 March 1850

<sup>622</sup> *The Weekly Tribune*, 2, 9, 16, 23 and 30 March; 6 April 1850.

<sup>623</sup> *The Weekly Tribune*, 16 March 1850.



Reform League, the Fraternal Democrats,<sup>624</sup> O'Brien's National Reform League and the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association (NPFRA).<sup>625</sup> But there were no delegates from the NRS and the organisation seems to have disappeared without trace around the middle of 1850. There are no records of its ever having a membership, merely an ad hoc committee which presented its ideas at public meetings, and it may well be that there was no need for it to exist independently of the other socialist and Chartist groups.

The conference got off to a promising start, unanimously passing a resolution "approving of the idea of fusing the scattered democratic elements in one grand concentration of objects, energies, and funds, for the purpose of carrying on a powerful struggle against the political abuses and social wrongs that exist in this country" and setting up a committee of representatives from each group to devise a plan of organisation.<sup>626</sup> A few weeks later the committee presented its report, recommending a choice of names for the organisation (after a vote it was decided to call it the National Charter and Social Reform Union) and suggesting that they campaign to achieve manhood suffrage as per the Charter, granting of land for home colonies, a law of industrial partnership, radical reform of the New Poor Law, freedom of speech and a national system of secular education. There was considerable optimism that the new union could work and *The Northern Star* reported that

during the whole of the proceedings the room was densely crowded with the most active and influential of the various sections of working class reformers, and the proceedings seemed to give general and unqualified satisfaction.<sup>627</sup>

But the devil was in the detail: the wording of each clause was fiercely debated and it soon became apparent that too many delegates wanted unity but only on their own terms. For some, there was no need to mention any reforms other than achievement of the Charter itself, while others argued that complete subservience to the Charter would alienate many socialists. The rot really set in, however when O'Brien abruptly withdrew the NRL delegates on the grounds that the union would split

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<sup>624</sup> The Fraternal Democrats were the internationalist wing of Chartism; forging links with foreign reformists and revolutionaries, including Marx and Engels. Their leader, George Julian Harney, was editor of *The Northern Star* and a member of the NCA executive.

<sup>625</sup> NPFRA was a middle-class organisation which advocated household suffrage and other mild electoral reforms. O'Connor, after years of vehemently denouncing the idea of anything less than the Charter, had recently changed tack and was looking for alliances with the middle classes.

<sup>626</sup> *The Leader*, 24 August 1850; *The Northern Star*, 24 August 1850.

<sup>627</sup> *The Northern Star*, 12 October 1850.



the Chartists,<sup>628</sup> even though its proposed social reform programme was almost identical to his own. O'Brien was partly right: the Chartists were in disarray, but attitudes towards the union were a symptom rather than a cause. The debacle of April 1848 and the failure of the land plan had damaged O'Connor's authority and others were looking to take the NCA in a different direction. Julian Harney proposed that the conference be disbanded, admitting that O'Connor, Ernest Jones (one of the main contenders for the leadership) and others were completely against the union, while even some who were in favour, such as Kydd and George Reynolds, were not prepared to actively support it. As *The Northern Star* reporter saw it,

the rest of the debate consisted, with a few exceptions, of attacks upon Mr. O'Connor. Mr. E. Jones, and Mr. Reynolds, also came in for a moderate share of this hitherto pent-up wrath.<sup>629</sup>

The conference adjourned for a few months, while the various groups consulted their members about how they should proceed. In February Harney announced that he now wanted the union to continue (probably as a result of a newly-elected, more progressive, NCA executive) and the conference agreed to hold a watching brief, pending the NCA's forthcoming National Convention.<sup>630</sup> This duly took place in April and resulted in the NCA committing itself to a programme of social reform almost identical to the ones promulgated by the National Charter and Social Reform Union and most of its constituent groupings. As a result, the union took the view that the NCA's change of direction meant that the future of political and social reform was safe in the Chartists' hands, and promptly voted itself out of existence. This may have been a face-saving formula, but if the delegates really believed it they were to be disappointed. The Chartists were fatally split: breakaway groups were forming and relationships between the NCA leaders degenerated into vitriolic squabbles. Throughout the 1850s the NCA carried on campaigning but finally petered out in 1860. Political and social reform would have to wait for another generation.

Mudie's name is not mentioned in accounts of these meetings, but, given his involvement with the NRS, it is probable that he was among the enthusiastic crowd who attended them. He can be positively identified on only two further occasions. The 1851 Census showed him still living at 23 Parr Street, Hoxton, together with Louisa and her niece. His occupa-

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<sup>628</sup> *The Northern Star*, 2 November 1850.

<sup>629</sup> *The Northern Star*, 9 November 1850. O'Connor had refused to attend the conference.

<sup>630</sup> *The Northern Star*, 8 February 1851.

tion was given as Author, Translator and Master Printer. His children, Jane, Robert, Charles and David, together with their families, were living either in Hoxton or nearby. In May 1851 his name appeared in a new weekly journal, *The Home*, as its office contact for prospective vendors or advertisers.<sup>631</sup> *The Home* campaigned vigorously for factory reform, particularly attempts to reduce the working hours of children to no more than ten hours per day;<sup>632</sup> it promoted protectionism for home agriculture and manufacturing, and opposed the liberal economists who advocated free trade. It supported the monarchy and Protestant Christianity, and it hated the New Poor Law. Its owner and editor, Richard Oastler, was a radical Tory and long-time advocate of factory reform, who had associated with Owen on the National Regeneration Committee in 1833. He had actively opposed the extension of workhouses during the late 1830s, when his inflammatory speeches against the New Poor Law had resembled the wilder parts of *The Book of Murder*.

Oastler's views only partially matched those that had been espoused by Mudie and others at the NRS meetings and there is no trace of Mudie's hand in any of *The Home*'s articles. His involvement may have been driven by economic necessity, or perhaps there was enough common ground to arouse his interest. Intriguingly, Oastler graciously declined a Mudie-ish suggestion from a "G. M. of London" that he should employ

a competently qualified person to hold free public meetings throughout the kingdom, to make *The Home*, its principles, and its objects, thoroughly known to the public.<sup>633</sup>

Whatever the extent of Mudie's involvement with *The Home*, it lasted less than three months; in mid-August Oastler announced that Mudie had left its office and that a Mr Thomas Ward had taken over his duties.<sup>634</sup> For Mudie, this seems to have been the end of the line. The only other possible reference to him that has come to light is from November 1851, when a "Mr Mudie" was part of a delegation from the Finsbury and Islington Kossuth Committee, which met the foreign secretary, Palmerston, to thank him for granting political asylum to the Hungarian revolutionary. Kossuth was very popular in radical circles and Hoxton is adjacent to both Finsbury and Islington, so Mudie might well have been there, but there

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<sup>631</sup> *The Home*, 3 May 1851.

<sup>632</sup> The 1847 Factory Act had restricted a child's working week to an average of ten hours per day, but only in the textile industry.

<sup>633</sup> *The Home*, 5 July 1851.

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 August 1851.

can be no certainty.<sup>635</sup>

George Mudie died on 2 July 1855 at 1 Featherstone Street, Finsbury, aged sixty-seven. The cause of death was shown as “general disease and debility” and his wife Louisa, who was present at his death, gave his occupation as “Editor to the Sun Newspaper”.<sup>636</sup> He was buried on 6 July at the Church of St John the Baptist, New North Road, Hoxton and his family had at least enough money to pay the standard burial fee of eight shillings and six pence, sparing him the indignity of being buried in a paupers’ grave.<sup>637</sup> The church is still there but the graveyard was removed many years ago to make way for a primary school. With his lifelong interest in education, one hopes that George would have approved.

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<sup>635</sup> *The Northern Star*, 22 November 1851. The 1851 Census lists several Mudie families in London, but, apart from a baker in Shoreditch, only George and his sons lived near Finsbury. “Mr Mudie” could feasibly have been George’s son, Charles, who was interested enough in radical politics to name his son after the Italian republican, Garibaldi. On balance however, George seems the most likely candidate.

<sup>636</sup> St. Luke, Middlesex, Register of Deaths, July-September 1855, Vol. 1b, p. 341.

<sup>637</sup> St John the Baptist, Hoxton, Parish Registers: Burials, 1855

## Conclusions

*Here stands an oak, unnoticed in the forest, but  
sound yet to the very heart, and bearing acorns  
which "fall neglected".*<sup>638</sup>

Of George Mudie's private life only the bare bones are known: he was well-educated; he married three times; he and his second wife, Jessy, had at least seven children, five of whom survived into adulthood and had children of their own; he named two of his children after people whom he respected; he survived one life-threatening illness; and he spent much of his life in dire poverty. His letters, to Owen, the Chamberses and *The Leeds Intelligencer*, make passing references to his family life: his youngest children going to infant school; his sons helping him to operate his printing press; his description of his third wife, Louisa, as a "virtuous and truly excellent woman"; his desire to support his family, and his distress, expressed on several occasions, when he was unable to do so. One should not read too much into these references, but the indications are that he took his family responsibilities seriously.

Mudie's professional life is better documented, and can hardly be described as a success story: most of the projects in which he was involved ended in failure. His newspaper ventures, *The Leeds Independent*, *The Leeds Gazette*, *The Eclipse* and *The Manchester Advertiser*, all fizzled out after a few months, although a case could be made for the success of *The Eclipse* on the grounds that Mudie's finances were strong by the time he closed it. The same pattern appears with his publications outside mainstream journalism, all of which ceased without warning, almost in mid-sentence. *The Economist* lasted for over a year and seems to have had an established reader base; its closure appears to be due to Mudie having more pressing demands on his time, rather than financial failings. However, the same cannot be said of *The Political Economist*, *The Advocate*, *The Cornucopia* or *The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars*, all of which lasted barely a few months. Only the *Daily Police Reports* made a profit, but all of that was lost when *The Cornucopia* failed.

His three spells of employment as a newspaper editor fared better and he remained in each post for around three years. His departure from *The Nottingham Gazette* was due to events beyond his control: it ceased publication because of an increase in newspaper stamp duty. The owners of *The Leeds Intelligencer* most certainly did not want him to resign, and its sales declined after he did so. The circumstances of his leaving *The Sun*

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<sup>638</sup> *The Era*, 18 February 1849, review of Mudie's *Portentous Enigma*.

are not known, but the advent of *The Eclipse* suggests that he left of his own accord.

Orbiston changed Mudie's life. Before 1825 his career in journalism and his co-operative activities, in spite of the fiasco in Leeds and the ending of Spa Fields, had been broadly on an upward curve; and financially he was comfortably off. He lost everything at Orbiston, after which he never recovered. His decision to remain in Edinburgh for the next seven years cut him off from the centre of the co-operative movement. He played no part in BAPCK, an organisation which could have been tailor-made for his talents, and whatever influence he might have had in the early 1820s evaporated very quickly. As early as 1826, William Thompson announced that he was planning a pamphlet on how to set up small co-operative communities, as Owen had not given any advice about it. It is as if all those column inches that Mudie had devoted to the foundation and progress of Spa Fields had never existed.<sup>639</sup>

As an Owenite he was a maverick: his belief in small, democratically run, self-funded, working-class co-operatives was at odds with Owen's paternalism and they disagreed over such issues as community of property, competition and spade culture. Yet, in spite of their differences, Mudie was dedicated enough to offer Owen his services in 1832, only to be rebuffed. He remained active within the movement, being involved in exchange bazaars, the Commonwealth of Labour, Skill and Capital and the New Benefit Society; but he never regained the prominent position that he had once held. Like Chartism during the years of Feargus O'Connor's dominance, Owen's movement, particularly after 1835, was monolithic and Mudie's position somewhat resembles that of William Lovett: a key player in the early years who was sidelined because he fell out with the leader. That said, other critics of Owen, such as Benjamin Warden, stayed inside the movement and continued to argue the case for greater democracy, and it is a great shame that Mudie's voice was lost to them.

His comment to Owen, that his fellow co-operators had anathematised him, while possibly exaggerated, does hint of personal as well as political differences and one has to wonder why the movement pushed him out. A similar question has to be asked about his aborted career in journalism. He was obviously a talented newspaper man, so why did no other paper give him a job after 1824? Certain patterns in Mudie's life offer possible explanations. There are several examples of acrimonious fallings out with those with whom he had worked: Griffith of *The Leeds Intelligencer*, Headley at *The Leeds Independent*, Combe and Hamilton at Orbiston, and Owen himself. Mudie seemed to be able to make enemies with ease; perhaps his talent for polemics sprang directly from his own character

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<sup>639</sup> *The Orbiston Register* No. 24 (20 December 1826), letter from "W.T."

and he really was the “choleric Scotchman” that Headley accused him of being. His inability to control his own finances, as shown by the numerous unpaid debts, the attempt to sue Griffiths, and Headley’s bill of exchange, left him wide open to accusations of fraud and dishonesty. Mud sticks and he made himself an easy target. His fondness for alcohol is alluded to more than once: his own admission that Headley had made him sign their partnership agreement after plying him with drink; Headley’s own claim that Mudie was found in a pub when he should have been working; “Philadelphus” writing of Mudie’s martyrdom to “claret and savoury viands”. The same could be inferred from Mudie’s last letter to Owen, when he was quick to stress his regular habits and sober lifestyle; perhaps also from his association with the National Regeneration Society, whose programme included a strong dose of temperance. Throw all of these incidents together and one can envisage a prickly character who was unreliable and not to be trusted. It would be an incomplete picture of course. Even if all the things his enemies said against him were true, these would have to be balanced against the positives: his devotion to Owen; the “utmost patience” with which he listened to the misgivings that the journeymen printers had about Owen’s plan; his altruistic espousal of the ideals of co-operation, even after he had lost his life savings at Orbiston and been ushered out of its inner circle; his support for improving working-class education; his attempts to support his family.

So why disturb his ashes and remember his name? Here are some reasons. He was one of Owen’s earliest core supporters; the one most responsible for bringing Owen’s plan to a working-class audience, and, by doing so, replacing its top-down philanthropy with bottom-up self-help. He founded the first co-operative society and the first co-operative community. Throughout 1821, while Owen was out of the public eye, his journal became the public face of the growing co-operative movement and its focal point for discussion and dissemination of ideas. He publicised progressive educational methods and contributed ideas of his own. As part of the Spa Fields community, he founded a school. He wrote educational textbooks. He was one of a small group of printers and publishers who revolutionised working-class reading habits by exposing them to literature which they could otherwise not afford to buy. As a foot soldier in the war of the unstamped press he helped working-class people to access political and economic ideas which the government wanted to suppress. In *The Book of Murder* he helped to generate considerable publicity for the campaign against the New Poor Law. He played a part in the attempt to unite Owenism with Chartism at a time when both were in decline. He was one of the army of co-operative activists who formed small societies, trades delegations and labour exchanges; and on whose shoulders the

labour movement stands.

But it is “M. The Economist” who should top the list of his achievements. Mudie was the first of the Owenites to argue that plans for social reform must have an economic basis, which should be strong enough to withstand hostile criticism. He was one of the earliest writers to attack the very nature of capital and to attempt to undermine the political economists’ faith in the free market. He expressed his ideas and arguments both powerfully and lucidly; he possessed a felicity with words, sharpened by years of polemical journalism. He also had close-hand experience of grinding poverty, acquired by being brought up in an Edinburgh tenement and later in the slums of Clare Market and Hoxton. Mudie was not born into the working class, but he fell into it and never managed to climb out again. Reading him alongside his fellow pre-Marxian anti-capitalist writers, one is struck by the immediacy of his prose and his ability to show, with piercing clarity, the devastating effects that capitalism had on people’s lives. His essays, however, remain buried in anonymous tracts and obscure publications, often entangled with long-winded letters from well-meaning readers. There is a case to be made for publication of a selection of his works.

George Mudie’s death prompted no known obituaries, but a review of his *Portentous Enigma*, by a publication with which he had no known connection, makes an appropriate epitaph:

Pamphlets have long titles, and remind us of jokes which require explanation. We have named this publication in full, because it comes from the pen of a veteran writer, and is not a mere promise; for Mr Mudie is capable of carrying out his undertakings; Mr Mudie does his work as “no ‘prentice hand” could do it. There is thought in it. His pamphlet is the production of a vigorous and a practised mind. We know something of Mr Mudie, and wish, for the sake of the public, that he occupied an editorial chair worth filling. Modern vegetation, as it were, has sprung up, and tall, and stout, and green – overgrowing, choking, and exterminating many a goodly old tree; but here stands an oak, unnoticed in the forest, but sound yet to the very heart, and bearing acorns which “fall neglected”. We advise the moral pioneer to penetrate the forest of literature, and seek out whatever falls from George Mudie, for he has seen much in his time, and not forgotten what has transpired around him.<sup>640</sup>

The oak is still out there and the acorns deserve to be gathered in.

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<sup>640</sup> *The Era*, 18 February 1849.

## Outline of life

- 1787 24 June: Born in Edinburgh, son of George Mudie and Jean Boyd; baptised 5 July in Greyfriars Kirk.
- 1790s Living at Horse Wynd, South Bridge Street and Adam's Square; attends Edinburgh High School.
- 1800 Father imprisoned for debt.
- 1806 27 August: Marries Mary Mackay in Tron Kirk.
- c1811 Member of the Edinburgh Forum debating society.
- 1812 11 April: Marries Jessie Esplin Forbes in Tron Kirk.
- May/Jun: Writes *An Authentic Account of the Trial and Execution of John Bellingham, for the Assassination of The Right Hon. Spencer Perceval; With a Vindication of The Character of Sir Francis Burdett from the Aspersions of Some of The London Prints.*
- 17 August: Living at 15 Leith Street; following the banning of his proposed speech on the Tron Riots, writes *A Few Particulars Respecting the Secret History of the Late Forum.*
- 1813 January: Employed by *The Nottingham Gazette*.
- 1814 22 August: Son Forbes Mudie and daughter Jane Jardine Mudie baptised in St Mary's, Nottingham.
- 1815 June: Appointed editor of *The Leeds Intelligencer*.
- 1816 Meets Robert Owen.
- 1817 14 August Living at Burley Bar, Leeds: Son David Mudie and daughter Mary Griffith Mudie baptised in St John's Church.
- 1818 Death of daughter Mary Griffith Mudie.
- December: Leaves *The Leeds Intelligencer* and becomes editor and co-proprietor (with William Headley) of *The Leeds Independent*.
- 1819 September: Leaves *The Leeds Independent* in acrimonious dispute with William Headley.
- November: Probable author of *Mr Owen's Proposed Arrangements for the Distressed Working Classes, Shown to be Consistent with Sound*



## Outline of life

*Principles of Political Economy: in Three Letters addressed to David Ricardo, Esq. MP.*

December: In partnership with several others, publishes *The Leeds Gazette*.

c1820 Son Robert Owen Mudie born in Leeds.

1820 May/June: *The Leeds Gazette* closes; moves to London and becomes editor of *The Sun*; probable author of *A Vindication of Mr Owen's Plan for the Relief of the Distressed Working Classes in reply to the Misconceptions of a Writer in No 64 of The Edinburgh Review*.

19 July: Living at 11 Grove Place, City Road, London; writes to home secretary offering to transmit information on the extent of discontent among the labouring classes.

August: Commences series of public lectures on Owen's plan at Mitchell's Assembly Rooms, Lincolns Inn Fields.

1821 22 January: With a group of journeymen printers, forms the *Co-operative and Economical Society*, with the aim of founding a co-operative community.

27 January: Commences weekly journal, *The Economist*.

August: Sues Griffith Wright, former owner of *The Leeds Intelligencer*, for unpaid wages; suit lost.

November: *Co-operative and Economical Society* sets up community at Guildford Street East, Bagnigge Wells Road, Spa Fields, Finsbury.

1822 9 March: Final edition of *The Economist*.

July: With other previous partners on *The Leeds Gazette*, sued for unpaid bills; suit only partially upheld.

1823 3 January: Still living at Spa Fields; writes letter to Owen concerning the latter's trip to Ireland; regularly gives lectures on political economy.

January/February: Edits *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*.

June: Still editor of *The Sun*; speaks at public meeting at the London Tavern in support of Spanish independence.

August: Speaks at public meeting chaired by Owen at the London Tavern about distress in Ireland.

Leaves Spa Fields community, which disbands.

## The Hidden Oak

- c1824 Son Charles Mudie born in London.
- 1824 March: With other partners on *The Leeds Gazette*, sued for unpaid bills; suit dismissed.
- 4 October: Edits and publishes a new London daily evening newspaper, *The Eclipse*.
- 1825 January: *The Eclipse* ceases publication; addresses meeting at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, London on virtues of Owen's plan; moves to Scotland to help set up co-operative community at Orbiston, founded by Abram Combe and Alexander Hamilton, in which he invests about £1,000.
- March: Prints two pamphlets by Combe, *The Sphere of Joint-Stock Companies* and *The New Court*.
- April/May: Leaves Orbiston following differences with Abram Combe. Loses all of his investment.
- 2 July: With Stephen Whalley, starts a new newspaper, *The Manchester Advertiser* which survives until December.
- Living at 25 Horse Wynd, Edinburgh; printer of John Gray's *Edinburgh and Leith Advertiser*.
- 1826 Regularly addresses trade societies and public meetings; founds the United Interests Society, situated at 88 Rose St, Edinburgh, later moving to larger premises, with store and bake house, at 14 Hanover Street.
- c1827 Son David Mudie born in Edinburgh.
- 1827 March: Commences writing and publishing *The Advocate of the Working Classes*.
- April: *The Advocate of the Working Classes* ceases publication; becomes seriously ill and has severe financial problems; United Interests Society wound up.
- 1827 With other members of United Interests Society, sued by the creditors of virtual dealer for unpaid bill.
- 1829 Commences writing, printing and publishing *Daily Police Reports* in Edinburgh.
- 1830 14 May: Living at 118 King St, Edinburgh; still writing *Daily Police Reports*; writes to Robert Owen.
- 1831 September: Co-editor/proprietor, in partnership with his brother William and son Forbes, of *The Edinburgh Cornucopia / The Cornucopia Britannica*.

## Outline of life

- 1832 18 January: Admitted to sanctuary for debt at Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh.
- March: *The Cornucopia* ceases publication; moves to London shortly afterwards.
- April: Appointed by third Co-operative Congress to the Edinburgh Co-operative District Council.
- Attempts to reunite with Owen but not welcomed.
- September: Edits and prints *The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars, and Practical Guide to the Rapid Establishment of the Public Prosperity*; addresses public meeting at the Institute of the Working Classes, Theobald's Road, London on the principles and formation of exchange bazaars.
- November: Attempts to set up an alternative exchange bazaar, the United Interests Exchange Mart and Bank, in Aldersgate Street; *The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars* ceases publication.
- 1833 June: Attends meeting of trades' delegates at Owen's Institute.
- August: Chairs meeting of the Commonwealth of Labour, Skill and Capital.
- December: Attends meeting of National Regeneration Society in Manchester, where he proposes introduction of a national minimum wage.
- 1834 November: Working as a printer in Fetter Lane, London, producing the unstamped *People's Weekly Police Gazette*; taken to court by another printer for poaching his apprentice; agrees to settle out of court.
- 1836 Writes *Mudie's New and Improved Method of Writing Short Hand*; and *A New View of Political Economy*; both published in *Hetherington's Diamond Almanack 1837*.
- 1838 April/May: Briefly resumes publication of *The Cornucopia Britannica* in London.
- 1839 Probable author of *The Book of Murder*; writes/publishes *The Alarm Bell! or Herald of the Spirit of Truth*.
- Writes/publishes *The Illuminated Temple of Letters, whereby the alphabet may be taught to infants in one day and reading is really made easy*.
- 1840 Living at 243½ The Strand, London, where he gives private lessons in English grammar; writes and publishes *The Grammar of the English Language truly made Easy and Amusing by the Invention of Three Hundred Moveable Parts of Speech*.

## The Hidden Oak

4 May: Witness at marriage of daughter Jane Esplin Mudie to William Calder Weddell at St Bride's Parish Church, The Strand, London.

September: Writes two open letters to William and Robert Chambers, refuting their claim to be the originators of "cheap literature". Letters published in *Cleave's Penny Gazette of Variety and Amusement* 5 and 12 September.

1841 1 April: Living with son David at 114 Fetter Lane, St Dunstan, London.

1842 Publishes plan for co-operative society, *New Benefit Society*.

1844 16 January: Living at 12 Stanhope Street, Strand; submits written affidavit in support of Richard Egan Lee and John Haddock, who were being sued in Chancery by Charles Dickens for pirating *A Christmas Carol*; court finds in favour of Dickens.

15 September: Marries Louisa Andow at St Bride's Church, Fleet Street.

1845 24 August: Witness at wedding of son Charles Mudie to Elizabeth Hunter at St John's Church, Clerkenwell, Middlesex.

1848 25 August: Living at 23 Parr St, Hoxton, London; writes letter to Owen offering services; offer declined; writes further letter 29 August.

1849 27 January: Writes *A Solution of the Portentous Enigma of Modern Civilization*.

August: Secretary of National Association of all Classes of the British and Irish People for the Regeneration, Prosperity and Happiness of Society, which holds a series of public meetings until mid-1850.

1851 1 April: Living at 23 Parr St, Shoreditch with wife Louisa.

May-August: working in office of *The Home*, edited by Richard Oastler.

November: possible member of delegation from the Kossuth Society who met Palmerston, foreign secretary.

1855 2 July: Dies at 1 Featherstone Street, St Luke, Middlesex.

6 July: Buried at St John's, Hoxton.

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# The Hidden Oak

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